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letters

more letters please!

from **Roger Keen, Hungerford**

I'm wary of discussions about the meaning of surrealism, since they tend to take a circular route ending in the disappearance up one's own arse — especially after a couple of pints. Nevertheless I feel I must respond to Rhys Hughes's remarks in TTA14 about my phrase 'surrealism as metaphor'. I can't wholly agree with his assertion that 'the images of surrealism are unfathomable to the conscious mind and thus can never be termed "metaphors"'. The conscious mind will do its best to evaluate them (if imperfectly) and attach meanings, as it does with any phenomenon — how else can we 'interpret' dreams? — and as such a metaphorical dimension can arise. I say this on *a priori* grounds as TTA writers do use surrealism metaphorically.

For example, in 'Last Rites and Resurrections' Martin Simpson uses the surreal idea of holding detailed eschatological conversations with animals as a metaphor for the grieving process. This seems to me a different thing from allegory or even extreme allegory. Of course not *all* surreal stories are metaphorical — Rhys's own probably are not. And then again one person's definition of 'surreal' may differ from another's... If you're going to the bar mine's a Guinness.

from **Robert Monk, Surrey**

I found myself agreeing a lot with Rick Cadger in TTA14. Firstly, his comments about 'experimental' writers were completely on target. Far too many authors write 'weird' just to prove how weird they can be. I admit that sometimes I might not understand or relate to what they're trying to say but I can't see the point in clouding a story with gimmicky writing. Quite often these gimmicks disguise the fact that the plot is not strong enough to stand up on its own. I believe in originality. But originality with a reason. We all read the same language, so why not get your message across within the necessary constraints of English? Now, I don't want this to sound as though I wish everyone would write in the same way. Far from it. I want to read good stories with realistic characters, amazing ideas, stunning images and all the rest of it. But what's wrong with writing to an audience? If I write something I want as many people to 'get' it as possible. Of course, I also take on board Rick's point that writing is a form of madness but I reckon it's the kind of madness that you want to share, to make everyone as mad as you are...

Rick's point about his real reason for writing *The Unquiet Soul* was interesting too. I can understand that fame is a big motive for writers — I share this to a degree. I suppose it *is* an ego trip. After all, if you didn't think that you had anything worthwhile to write then you wouldn't write at all. But, I think most writers want their ideas to be famous. My views, my beliefs; I'd rather have them last longer than my name.

from **Mat Coward, Somerset**

One of the amazing things about TTA is how often you read a terrific, confident, voice-filled story and then get to the note about the author at the end and discover, incredibly, that it's a debut. I mean, bloody hell, where do fully-formed writers like Paul Meloy suddenly appear from? I got extra pleasure from his 'The Last Great Paladin of Idle Conceit' because it doubles the number of stories I know of which fit into the sub-genre 'slipstream stories in which Tony Hancock puts in an appearance' (the only other one I've come across being one of my own in *Works* a few years ago). In the interest of pedantry, though, I should point out that Hancock wasn't found dead 'in a bath tub' but on a rented bed in Sydney.

[Oops... I'm glad to say, though, that according to readers who expressed a preference Paul's story was still the most popular of TTA14.]

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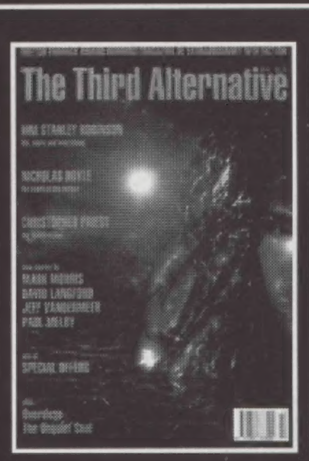
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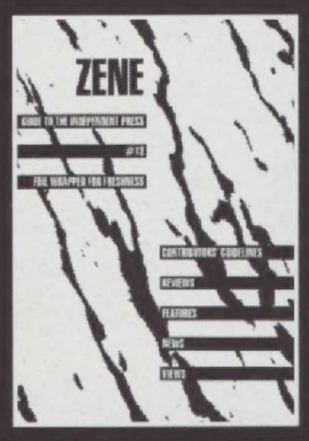
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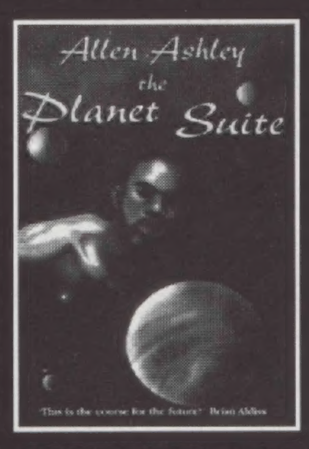
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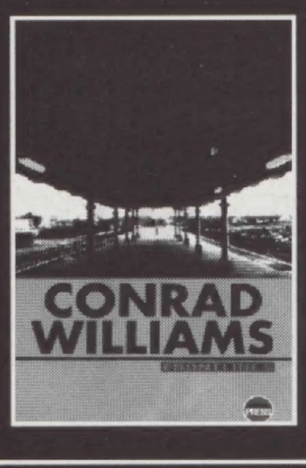


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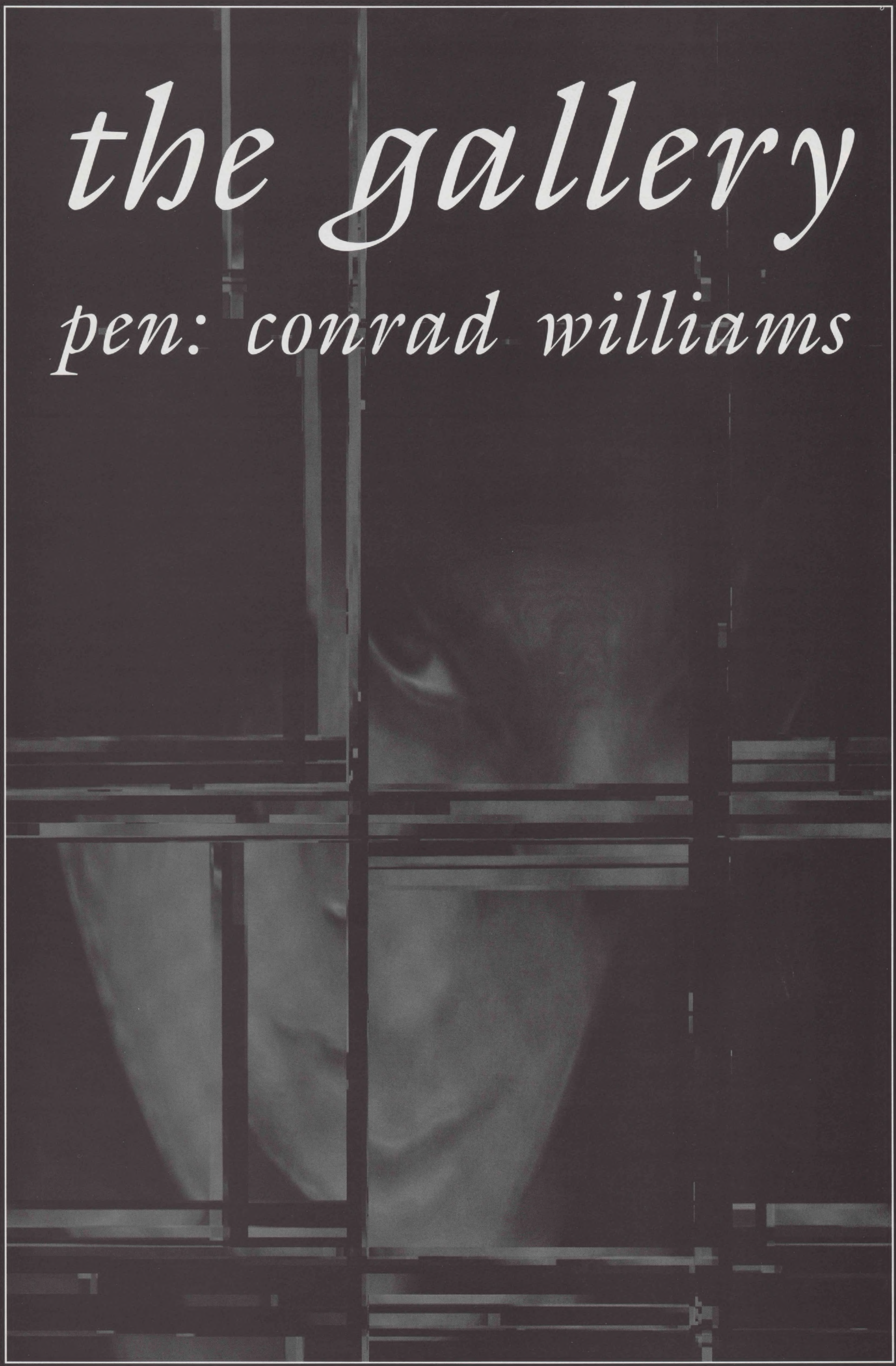
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the gallery

pen: conrad williams



IT WAS THE THIRD WEEK IN A ROW THAT I HAD put Marley off. I could tell she wasn't happy about it; she had asked me to come with her to the Bead with a resigned sigh, expecting the answer I dutifully supplied. As a sweetener, I threw her a line about meeting up later without knowing whether I would or not. It clinched the requisite smile, anyway.

"Okay," she said, coming over to straighten my collar and press the back of her hand against the polymer cast of my half-mask. I could almost imagine the chill of her flesh. "Meet me at four thirty, by the Bead entrance. We'll get Shopped for half an hour."

"Great," I said heavily, but not without a smile.

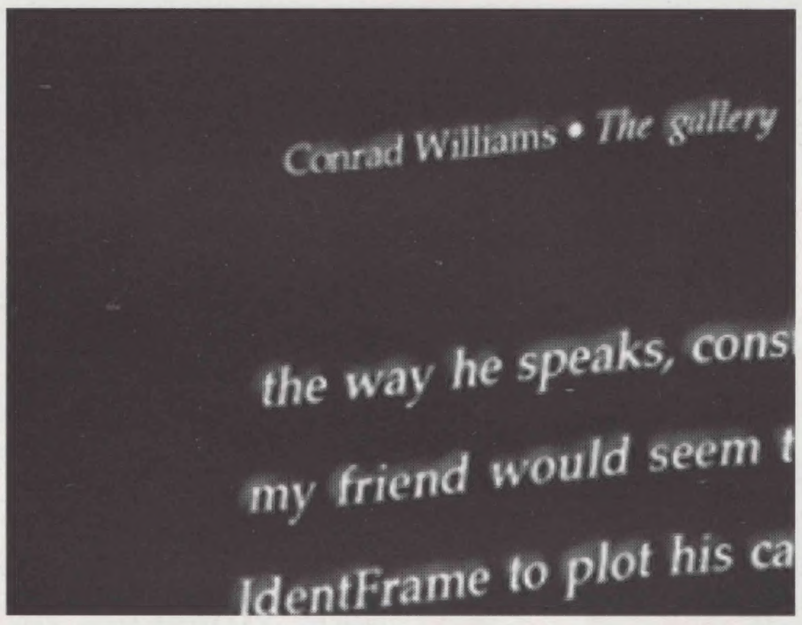
"What are you going to do with your day?" she asked, an ironic slant to her eyebrows, "as if I didn't know?"

"I'm going to the Gallery," I said, maybe a bit too defensively, "and then I thought I might go to Rouffe's place for a few hours."

Her smile disappeared. "Rouffe? Jesus, Cloake, I thought you'd given that up. Can't you just be satisfied with the Gallery? Why do you have to filthy yourself up with Oldstuff?" She almost choked on the word but she managed to steer herself back on course. "You know what'll happen to you if the — "

"Yes," I said, gently propelling her towards the Chute. "I know what will happen to me if the Hoods find out. Look at me, I'm trembling like the last leaf on the tree."

"I'll not watch you die," she said. "I'm getting tired of you taking all these risks." And her parting shot, as she was vacced out of sight into the Chute, wrapped in her shiny green cagoule like a clot of snot hawked up a nostril: "You're a fool, Cloake! A bastard fool!"



AND MAYBE I AM. WE GET A BAD PRESS, US FOOLS. But what's so harmful about being a simple soul who wants to keep a grip of yesterday? I like sunsets, when I can get up on the roof to see over the cluttered mess of the city to see one. I like rain, although not this discoloured, stinging stuff that spoils the window frames and makes the air smell of brimstone. I don't like change. I don't really like the Gallery but that's as close as we're allowed to get to our past. Which is why I like Rouffe.

After Marley had gone, I had a second cup of coffee and shaved in front of the mirror, gingerly peeling back the lower edges of my mask to get at the tricky hairs there where my skin wasn't too mangled. I gently lubed the rubber seal that houses my bad eye, which isn't really an eye at all, but a tiny camera whose fibres have been Organifused with the few optical nerves I have left. A fair job, but I have a problem with colours out of that side. Not that there are any colours left in the city worth looking at.

I pulled on a jumper and a woollen beanie, stuffed a deck of credits in my pocket without bothering to count them and had a quick look around the flat to see if I'd forgotten anything. The pristine walls, the dehumanised, ultra-hygienic whiff of nothing at all made me feel ill. For the *n*th time I dreaded returning and sleeping under the heated airduvet, the warm breath in my lungs being replaced by recycled, refrigerated alien stuff pumped out of the bowels of the city. I could resist, if I wanted to; strike out on my own. I never had to see this cubicle again. But for Marley…

I fed myself into the Chute thinking of vacuum packaging and sterilisation techniques and waxen, mirthless faces telling me how great it was to be alive, have another course of injections why don't you?

I FLEW WASPS DURING PETAL DAWN. YOU HEARD right. Petal Dawn. Don't ask me who was fighting… Cowboys v Indians, Cops v Robbers, Us v Them. Same as always. Does it matter?

We were a cure. We were the magic dust that turns water into wine. One day, a Metropolis stood by a river's edge. It might have been called London; I don't remember. By the following morning we'd razed it. Fires cleansed one thousand square miles of rat-infested alleys of crime. I don't even know why we did it. We were conscripted. Those who could fly were given things to fly. We were shown targets and told to sting them. We stung them. We got medals. If we refused, we were shaken by the hand and fed along a conveyor belt into a wet, red, watertight room where they kept the rotating blades. I had no choice.

Wow, they used to say regardless, *brave chap, jolly well done*. Until I drop this on them: I shot down the ArcticAir behemoth, flight 349. When they hear that, it's like they've just been fed a teaspoon of dog's vomit, the way their smiles dissolve.

After 349, I spent a long time giving the neck of a bottle serious lovebites, pumped my veins full of memory-blocking colours and shapes. At some point, hobbling in the scavenging dark of my conscience and the cratered no-man's land beyond the city parameters, I'd thrown myself in front of a freight train. I'd been out of it so long, I hadn't even *noticed* the new city being built around me until I woke up in one of its hospitals, looking like some kind of human anemone, there were so many tubes sticking out of and into me.

"Look, Marley," I said, drugged up to my one good eyeball, "this tube is the important one. See? It's important because…" I leaned towards her, lots of theatre, and whispered: "…because…*it doesn't go anywhere*."

Marley had found me. She'd picked me up, picked up the shattered shell of my face and carried me on her back, a mile, to the casualty bays where my head was slotted back together. I still wasn't sure who she was.

"Hush," Marley whispered to me on the first insufferable nights away from any of my crutches, "it's all right now. You can start to forget. Try not to suffer."

I tried not to suffer. Gradually, I rallied. I began to forget. I began to escape from the suffering.

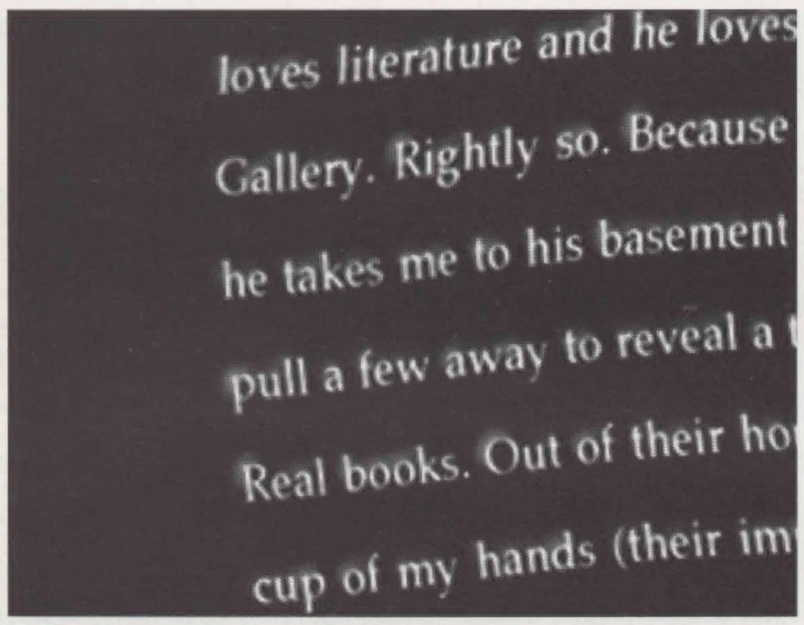
Yeah. Really.

Something I never told anyone. Maybe so there'd be no compassion, maybe so I'd suffer rightly for my unforgivable sin. My parents were on that flight.

I WALKED BACKSTREETS. THE CONCRETE IS orange-blue here, wet with rain and a collision of light from the Zeps floating above the city and the neon slabs that cluster beneath most of the roofs. I don't like the main drags. The traffic is noisy, dirty and dangerous. Like the people.

The Gallery is on DWay > . It's a little far to walk, but I don't mind. There are extra risks. Anywhere that isn't < (*central* to sign-haters such as myself) is apt to be patrolled heavily by Hoods. They don't like to see you loning it; prefer it if you were shepherded around in a terrorist-targeted bus. I've been stopped occasionally. On one memorable evening, I was strip-searched on AWay > , which is as close as you can get to the inner roads without actually being on them. They were suspicious about the mask. Thought it was a disguise. I've got to know some of the Hoods quite well. Some of them have the courtesy to flash you a badge before crowning you with their volt-coshes.

I slipped out of CWay > and hurried past a cluster of kids on the corner of the street. While they were busy pelting a dog with stones, they might not pay much attention to me. The Gallery made itself known via a flat disc of cool metal slotted into the wall outside its window. When you touched it with your special subscriber's key , it made a faint gong-like echo and deducted 500 credits from your bank account — or in my case, Marley's bank account. The entire partition of glass slid down into a housing and let me through, wincing, as I always did, when I imagined the glass malfunctioning and shooting back up to cleave me in two.



Halve was at the desk, a sloping bank of white underlit on her side which make her face seem longer. She was wearing a grape-coloured chenille jumper and soft, anthracite slacks that made me want to reach out and stroke her.

"Catalogue?" she asked, pushing a wodge of thick brown hair behind her ear. She wasn't fazed by the mask. Most people weren't. There were a lot of them around. I could never get used to them getting so used to me.

I nodded and she handed me a foolscap glossy white plastic folder with an off-white matte lower case 'g' embossed in the bottom right hand corner. Inside was a single page, stitched into the spine with purple thread. I stroked the paper. Smelled it, not caring what Halve thought. It smelled new, antiseptic. It read:

20th century Miserablists
or
The Hard-boiled 'Tec

"Are you getting anything else in?" I asked Halve.

"We've got the carb analysis lab working on some new fragments. Some kind of romantic text, they believe. And some tosh they found deep underground in a steel drum. Hardbacks by a dud called Archer. There was a sign on it, barely readable, but they reckon it said 'PRICE SLASHED'." She laughed. I did too. Just to give my mouth something to do; I didn't know what she was talking about.

"I'll go with the Miserablist stuff," I said, "just to counter the nonstop comedy of my life."

She gave me a look then slid an obsidian key into a socket. There was a lovely, snug 'thunk' sound and I felt a hum surge through my feet.

"Gallery One," she said.

I gave the catalogue back to Halve and padded past a few security apes who nodded at me without looking me in the eye. An archway gave on to an expansive room floored with lacquered parquet. Heated air wafted at me, urged on by giant fans clinging to the roof, fifty feet above the ground. I headed for the bank of screens at the top end. As I neared, the power surge reached a peak and they stuttered into life, seeds of blue light scattering across a liquid black background. A montage of letters evolved out of the gloop of light: a story title and an author. *The Mainstream*, it was called, by some Pen called Nicholas Royle. I read for a while, my fingers itching to hold paper, my nostrils thwarted by the lack of input. When my eye reached the bottom of the screen, the words dissolved and were replaced by more. The story hissed and stuttered its meaning into me. It was a frustrating, yet edifying experience. I followed the complex peaks and troughs of the story like a pilot absorbs pitch and roll and yaw.

Feeling that my actions were being governed by some other person exterior to me, I turned and got back into the car

I nodded at the words without fully understanding, trusting the narrator with the same helpless love a dog bestows upon its owner. That was part of the buzz for me, clinging to the peccadilloes of a language that was dying, or already dead.

There was another story, called *Common Land*, by a Pen called Joel Lane; another, *More Tomorrow*, by Michael Marshall Smith. I wondered if Rouffe had his fingers into any of this. The authors' pictures, rendered in washy pixels, came into view, floating out of the Boolean soup like weak discs of fat floating on the surface of one of Rouffe's casseroles. Faces of writers dead a century or so. God, why did they look so wasted, so starved?

I sensed someone else in the room with me, and glanced right. A woman nestled into a deep fleece, her blonde hair and a moist slice of lip discernible at the curve of her hood, was mouthing the words spread across her screen. She glanced at me, smiled, returned to her screen. I went over to her and said hello. She was reading a story by some Pen called Williams.

"Look at this," she said, gesturing at a passage that swam on the screen's purplish surface.

"Christ," I breathed, impressed. "Miserable *bastard*."

"Isn't he?" she said. "You should read his later stuff. You'd slash your wrists." She read on a little more and then: "Miserable, *miserable* bastard."

I liked her. We talked some more and I eyed her up best I could, even though she was on my wrong side. She had a scar on the bridge of her nose. Her eyes were dark blue, the colour of storm water. She had big, meaty lips, bow-shaped. Nice.

"I'm Cloake," I said and shook her hand.

"Keri."

"I haven't seen you around before," I said.

"Well, that beats 'Do you come here often?'" She nodded, looking me up and down, appraising me. Did I like that? Mmm, just a little bit. Keri shrugged her head out of the hood; a lot of hair — more than I'd anticipated — followed it. She looked around her. "You haven't seen me because I generally come here late at night, well after the place has closed down. I have a pass."

"Whoa," I said. "Privileged woman."

"That's right. My father owns this place, and a few others out in the Belt. You should see them."

"Not much chance of that is there? Hoods here are very protective of the chicks in their nest. Like, they don't want anybody leaving it."

"There are ways."

I nodded. "Like I said, 'privileged woman'."

"I could take you one day, if you're interested." She raised her eyebrows. I caught a whiff of something — peaches.

"I don't know. I'm quite happy with this place."

"You should try broadening your horizons."

I thought of Rouffe. "I do okay."

After a while, our verbal tennis match coming along beautifully, one of the security apes came and stood next to me. "Time's up, Joe," he monotoned.

"But I haven't finished."

"So read more quickly."

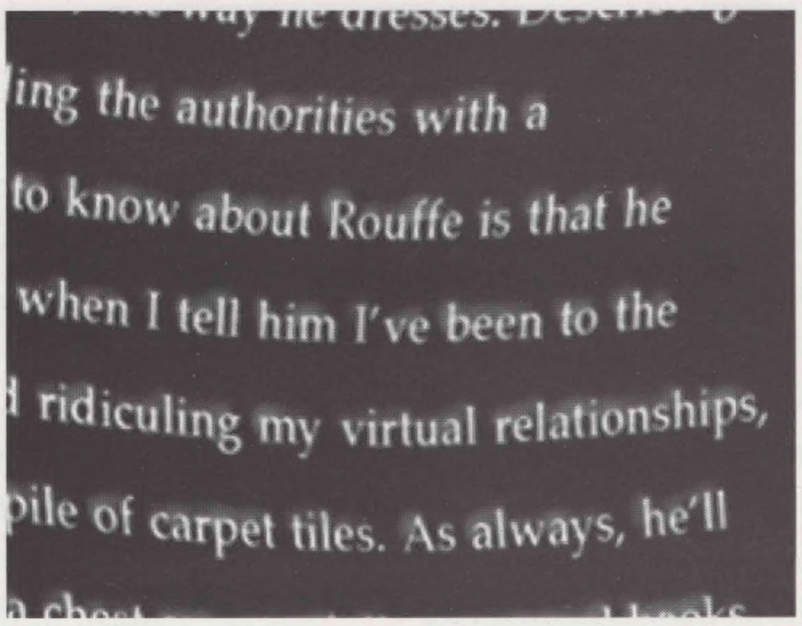
I didn't argue. It was a routine we had. Keri wasn't going to stick around too long either; I heard her footsteps creaking on the floorboards as I tipped a wink at Halve and made my way outside.

"So I can't tempt you?" Keri called, replacing her hood and drifting backwards away from me: she was heading for the nest of alleyways that would lead her towards H, J or KWay. All right for some.

"I'll be here tomorrow. Same time, if you want to tell me more. I'll buy you a coffee. Or whatever passes for it these days."

"Deal," she said. She turned and strode away, raising a hand after a while. I liked that too. That she had the confidence, or temerity, to know I'd still be watching her. I liked a lot about her.

TIME TO SHARE A SECRET. THE ONLY REASON I GO to the Gallery is to take some heat off me. I reckon that if I'm seen by the Hoods in a controlled literary haven, I'll be able to give them the slip when I hit a hardcore joint such as Rouffe's. *Such as*. Now there's a laugh. I don't know of anyone else dealing in Oldstuff. Don't know that many people around who have a clue as to what Oldstuff is. Why I have any interest in it is all wrapped up in my parents. Call it sentimental claptrap, call it a sad old bastard running to seed looking for a way to punish himself for what he did. Call it atonement. My father was a novelist. Not a great one, but he was able to spin a yarn good as the next Pen. He could get people turning pages, which is what counts I suppose, so it doesn't matter one jot to me that he didn't win any literary prizes or shining critical notices. Each book he put out had an audience of sorts and as long as he had a manuscript to deliver, his publishers were always happy to keep his contracts topped up, even though he was never going to be on their A-list. Maybe another reason for going to the Gallery was to one day punch up a story of my father's, one of the last real Pens before the Hoods drew a line under the final chapter and closed the book. It's for exactly the same reason, and perhaps one or two more, that I haunt Rouffe's grotto.



GETTING TO ROUFFE'S IS NOT easy. In fact, it is a grade-A bitch. If there are Hoods around, you have to forget it. The merest threat of heat in Rouffe's patch could wind up with his grotto in dust, him executed and yours truly in clink for the rest of my natural. But trust me, the risks are worth it.

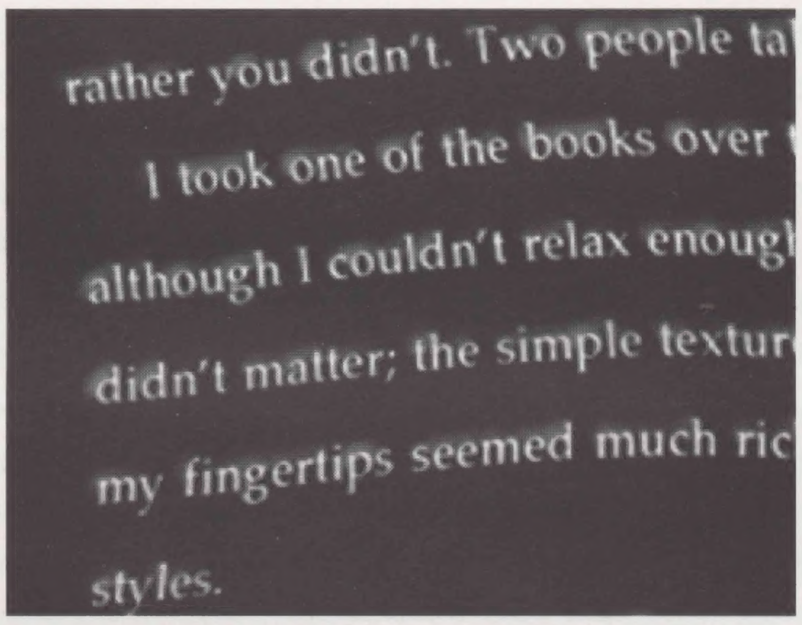
There's a railway runs through the city, long disused but still accessible. I slipped off DWay < and, checking all the while for Zeps and Hoods, I slid and swore my way down the embankment, as conspicuous as a smear of shit on wedding cake. At the bottom, afforded token concealment by a denuded rhododendron bush and straggled ranks of bastard cabbage, I scanned the sky once more then struck out along the rails, which stretched to a sharp point in the distance on either side of sleepers coated in a thin fall of snow from the previous night. I had to pick my way round hillocks of litter and junk, in varying stages of decay. There were a few bodies down here; I tried my best to ignore the frozen outstretched limbs that jutted from the undergrowth like motifs of supplication on a church hoarding. At one point I came across a Cessna, concertinaed into the embankment. The pilot's body was still in the cockpit, hands gripping the steering column; his head was a scarlet bloom on the fuselage prow, like a religious icon decorated from behind by the crushed radials of the propeller.

It was getting on, the sun a pale suggestion behind the bank of insistent cloud. A sequence of grey blocks marked the south section of the city, rising into the sky like a vertical pavement. I wouldn't have much time before I had to meet Marley back at the Bead; missing her would not

be a good idea. A fragile type, Marley would find reasons, true or otherwise, to attack the tissues that bonded us, perhaps exposing deep-seated facts about ourselves that neither of us were equipped to cope with. Not yet anyway. We were both — thanks to different phantoms — deeply unstable people, picking our way through the ruins of the city, trying to absorb something real and solid to act as a foundation upon which we might rebuild our shattered lives. That I could be so rational and accepting of my inconsistencies was my advantage; that Marley could recognise her lapses into melancholy was hers.

I surfaced, ever so slowly, at XWay>, at the edge of a maze of estates and factories which ringed the hub of the southern section of the city. There was hardly anyone around. I jinked down a few sidestreets, looped back on myself, stood on the bridge over the canal and watched the rainbows stream beneath me. I sat in Concrete Park and looked at the concrete birds and the concrete cars and the concrete people.

I waited. It didn't take long this time. I stared into the bank of fences and walls, their shape and substance lost to a miasma of colour, courtesy of the local graffiti artists, or so Rouffe liked the Hoods to think. Pretty soon, trying to force the limits of my focus beyond the solid bank of patterns ahead, Rouffe's grotto was made known to me. He was using the same access as last week which was possibly a risk but more possibly the work of a man with more nerve than me. The door shimmered out of the swirl of paints, assuming a clarity that had, moments ago, been a blur. The illusion beaten, I could return my eyes to their relaxed state and still see the door — and, as always, wonder how I could possibly have missed it or how anyone could walk by without clocking it.



My fingers itched; I smelled ghosts, but I managed to still my enthusiasm in favour of one final look round. Satisfied that I was alone, I drifted over to the door and tapped it with my fingernail three times… two times… three times.

"Open Sesame," I murmured, as Rouffe worked his magic and the colours absorbed me.

I'LL NOT GIVE YOU A THUMBNAIL REGARDING Rouffe. Form your own opinion. From the way he speaks, construct his build, his looks, the way he dresses. Describing my friend would seem too much like providing the authorities with an IdentFrame to plot his capture. All you need to know about Rouffe is that he loves literature and he loves it real. He scoffs when I tell him I've been to the Gallery. Rightly so. Because once he's stopped ridiculing my virtual relationships, he takes me to his basement and shows me a pile of carpet tiles. As always, he'll pull a few away to reveal a tea chest. In the tea chest are carefully wrapped books. Real books. Out of their housings of cellophane and brown paper, sitting in the cup of my hands (their immanent weight so comfortable you'd think my flesh were designed for such moments) I can smell the suggestion of real worlds, far beyond the pared down, pale and petrified coma world I pass through today with all the commitment and vigour of a man at an MWay service station. I turn the pages, Rouffe chuckling at my patent aggrandisement, and in each ring of tea or coffee, each pencilled comment in the margin, each pressed flower I can cling to what is human in me. This, more than any amount of current social interaction helps me to shape the way I must live my future. No, strike that, it just helps me to live. God knows how far I would have gone to snuffing myself out before Marley, before Rouffe.

"I can't stay long," I said.

"You never do," Rouffe replied, sitting in front of the battered bank of hard drives and monitors that helped maintain the shield he hid behind. "And I'd rather you didn't. Two people talking is more noise than I'm happy with."

I took one of the books over to an armchair and read for twenty minutes although I couldn't relax enough to digest most of what it was trying to relate. It didn't matter; the simple textures of paper and ink and dustjacket subsumed by my fingertips seemed much richer than any of the book's codes or narratives or styles.

I took some tea with Rouffe and we chatted about the Hoods and how restrictions and laws in the city were becoming so tight, soon my visits would have to stop because they would no longer be any pedestrian activity. I realised my fingers were straying to the spines of the books, massaging them as if trying to make supple again what the centuries had made brittle. Rouffe's voice was a burble of thick consonants and fluting vowels, its rhythm a counterpoint to all the angles and discords in my life. When the clock chimed four, even the haste with which I jumped from my seat seemed Morphean, unreal.

"I must go. Marley… She'll be livid if I don't keep our appointment."

Rouffe simply nodded and simpered, the inherent message being that he would see me again.

"You'll be here?" I asked, but I didn't linger to find out. I pulled on my jacket and slipped outside, waiting for the colours in the wall to spit me clear. Rouffe would be there. He always was.

THE BEAD MADE ITSELF KNOWN TO ME AS I turned the corner into UWay<, a building with a huge dome runnelled with black lines: a huge egg wrapped in a web. The lines were Vac Chutes, designed with punctuative chambers that delivered you to the shop of your choice. By the time I made it to the entrance — a gilded arc festooned with carved flowers and cherubs, further decorated with fountains that sprayed coloured water — I was ten minutes late. Marley was standing by the mouth of the Vac Chute, arguing with a Hood who, presumably, had become irritated by her lack of purpose.

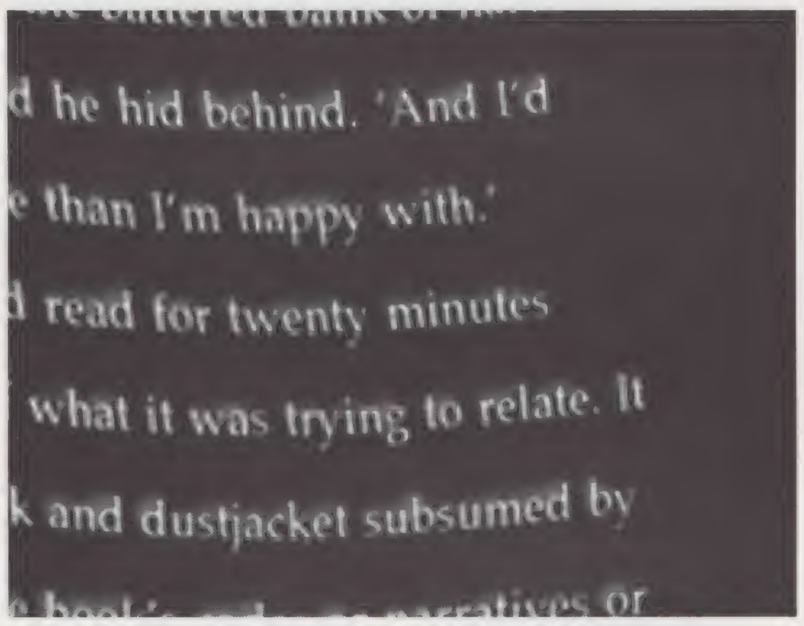
"It's okay!" I called, jogging over and trying to smile. "She's no vagrant. No terrorist. She's with me. We're going

to get Shopped. It's fine, really." The Hood gave me a once over with those awful, nictitating eyes and then asked to see our papers with a voice that was raspily metallic. The quilted wrap that guarded his nose and mouth was grey and ragged. Something squirmed out of a fold and squirmed straight back in again. I handed over our ID discs, trying my best not to touch the bastard.

Reluctantly, he nodded us through and I thanked him profusely. I'd heard the rumours of internal body searches and interrogations so brutal they'd left the victims psychologically scarred. I didn't want any of that; I propelled Marley through the entrance and sealed her in the chute, programming the capsules to travel in tandem. As the journey began, Marley's chastisement of my lateness scalding my ears, I thought I saw Keri drifting across the plaza. Concealed by her voluminous coat, she was being followed by two Hoods. She wouldn't hear if I shouted a warning but then we were scooped up over the top of the building and all I could see was sky and the silver glint of credit decks as they waited to swallow our money.

WE ARRIVED BACK AT THE DORM AS NIGHT SPILLED its guts across the city. Marley was in no mood for soft talk or getting naked and I couldn't blame her. I'd been a shit. On top of the Hood incident, I'd been distracted during the entire Bead trip, showing little interest in her purchases or the whole rigmarole of the 'sale suits' making their pitches at us from podia dotted around the various showrooms.

She went for a shower and I sat by the Com, wishing I'd asked Keri for her number. I contacted the Gallery and talked to Halve but she wasn't allowed to divulge customer information.



"But I'm worried," I protested, "I think she might be in trouble."

"With the Hoods? Then she ought to be more prudent where her misdemeanours are concerned." Halve's voice was as glossy and featureless as the catalogues she managed. There was no point trying to convince her of the corruptibility of the Hoods and their network; I downed the link and sent a signal to Rouffe's node.

"Forget her,' he said, when I told him what I'd seen, "she means nothing to you and if she's being tracked by Hoods then you don't need that kind of excitement in your life. Not that I give a fig for your well-being, you understand. But a link to you is a link to me and, my friend, I'm not quite ready to be put in a state where a machine is doing my breathing for me. So desist. Forthwith. Keep your grubby little fingers where Marley can see them."

The link downed, I lay back on the floor and listened to the waterjets playing in the bathroom. Tomorrow I would have to go back to the Gallery and see if she turned up there. If she didn't, I would have to work on Halve, coax some information out of her.

"Who was that on the Com, darling?" Marley said, emerging from a bank of steam. I could tell she was pissed off. She only ever called me 'darling' when she was narked about something.

"Rouffe," I said. "Check the datatape for yourself if you don't believe me."

"Ooh, defensive mode. Something to hide."

It would be easier to handle if that last shot had come over as a question. Instead, I shrugged myself deeper into the newsbites on the VDU. Over it all I could only think of Keri. And feel bad about my unspoken obligation to Marley. I'd betrayed her though nothing had happened. But maybe I needed this dilemma to prove how I truly felt for the woman who had saved my life. For too long I had allowed myself to be controlled by gratitude. I had to claim my own life back from the person who was living it for me. Once I'd done that, I could look objectively at her and our relationship. There. I'd convinced myself.

Queues in the market sector... A war over the latest puddle of oil discovered in the DeepCore Operations... Rumours that the Hood hierarchy was about to be reshuffled... A Litcrime discovered in one of the Hives on the edge of the city — some fool reciting poetry to an underground audience. He was to be burned publicly in a few hours. I thought of Rouffe and the risks we were taking and shuddered.

Marley had moved on to new ground. My mask was beginning to smell, she said. It wasn't. I peeled it off and showed her how little fluid there was, how clean the scars were. The wires unfurled from the socket of my eye like a questing anemone. I only stopped when she began to cry. I left her and went to the bedroom, knowing full well that nothing would be resolved here. I went out. Fuck the dangers.

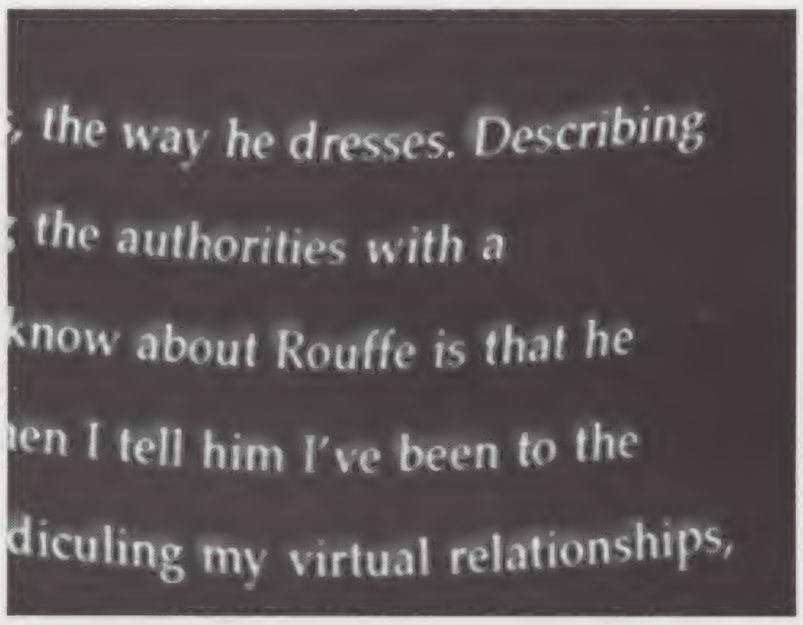
I'D NEVER BEEN OUTSIDE AT this hour before. Zeps moved across the sky, a necklace of moons, underlit by the blinking sequins of their beacon mappers as they roved the country, feeding data to the Hoods HQ; the new satellites since cloud cover reached 100 per cent and made all those NASA trinkets up there redundant. I could tell it wasn't going to be easy; the corners of the streets glowed in cones of light and movement; Hoods, or worse, picking off stragglers like me. It was anything goes, this time of night. Flouting curfew rules was as close to committing suicide as you could get. I could imagine the shell from one of the Hood's ArmaPaks thudding into my good eye and switching off the lights for ever. Kind of comforting. So I pressed on, bitterly relishing the panic Marley would be in when she realised I'd gone.

South of KStreet< I lucked upon a stray Hood and winded him with a kick to the balls, coming out of shadow before he had a chance to draw. I dragged him into the dark and, digging my fingers under the masks of bandage, pulled until they were free of his pocked, sodden face. The speech grille was fused with the flesh of his lips and it stank to high heaven when I finally prised it clear. I divested him of his greatcoat (grenades wadded into the utility belt, very tasty) and his piece — nice one, Huebber

and Larroche, twelve rounds, semi-automatic: the deadliest thing you could sit in the palm of your hand, barring Marley's tongue, that is — and got myself into Hood mode, gagging on the smell but it was something I had to learn to live with. Better that than to be gagging on my own blood, my chest torn apart thanks to one from the wrong end of one of these Huebbers.

When it looked like my friend was reviving, I slugged him one on the back of the head, watched him deck it, then gave him another by way of a parting shot. I'd just pulled the snood down over my forehead, stepping back on to the main drag, when a coach slewed into the street and bore down on me with its manifold headlights. It swung in close, doors peeling back, and I hopped on board, leaned languidly over one of the handrails, heart beating out an apocalyptic drum solo. I had no choice in the matter. In the recess of the bus, thirty or so Hoods cast me a cursory glance. I nodded to those who delivered a greeting and then returned my attention to the bland streets blurring into ribbons beyond the window. What had I done? What the hell had I done? My panic was such I almost started giggling.

We left the city behind. I didn't know where we were going or how likely I was to be exposed; I suppose that depended heavily on the Hood I'd popped. Maybe he was raped, dead and dismembered by now, jumped by the sewage scavengers for meat. I hoped so. The coach rattled on towards a range of hills. Dawn was an hour or two away but there was already a greenish pallor to the hilltops and suddenly I was back in childhood, going out for a day trip to the seaside; if I turned round now all the Hoods would be eating ice-cream and singing daft songs:



We're off, we're off, we're off in a motor car
Sixty miles an hour and I don't know where we are

And then I saw that the hills weren't hills at all. They were funeral pyres. I remembered the bulletins concerning the poet. As we approached, I saw that we were to be part of a 'military' presence, to keep the crowds in order. The coach slowed at the same time as a crocodile of rags were led out from a bunker, linked with heavy chains so that they resembled a travelling fence of flesh. I recognised Bunce, the condemned poet, being forced through the throngs of observers, who were busy trying to whip up a froth of anger but it was all for the Hoods, who had forced everyone from their beds to watch this. Everyone was trying to outdo each other's pale outrage. Everyone wore expressions of bewilderment. Nobody knew what was going on any more.

The human chain was brought to a standstill in front of the bonfires, two people to each woodstack. I shivered, despite the rags swaddling my face, thinking of me and Rouffe bound together and torched for our subversive sessions in that strange, forbidden library.

Then things happened quickly. I saw Keri. She was skirting the edge of the crowd near the front, budged into a position by Hoods who had infiltrated the audience and were like pins in an unwieldy structure, keeping it from fragmenting. What were they doing? Forcing her to watch as a warning to her? Was she their prisoner? Had she been since the last time I saw her, in the plaza? I tried to reveal myself to her, to give her a signal, but there were too many people in the way and too many Hoods nearby.

Marley was easy to spot: a wan figure, motionless in the scrum, her hair hidden beneath a cherry-coloured hat I'd bought her after I came out of hospital. It seemed much of the city had been roused from slumber to observe this display of power; a warning to anybody thinking of subverting the current zombified state. Beyond the outermost fringe of attendees, I saw something else that chilled me. Armoured bikes and Hoods weighed down with heavy artillery wrapped high across their chests or slung low over hips. The throaty ripple of the bikes cut across the clamour of voices. Bunce was trying to be heard above the noise as he recited stanzas that were punched with stinging references to freedom, brotherhood and peace. Oh, the Hoods were mightily wounded, I don't think.

There was going to be trouble. The Hoods had obviously been issued a directive to instigate a riot and to fill some bodybags.

I moved towards Marley, trying to get her attention, but she just backed off, eyes oscillating between the insignia on my tunic and the heavy ropes that bound the poet and his cohorts. I gripped the Huebber tightly in my pocket. Although I'd been excited to acquire it, the thought I might use any weaponry seemed remote. Now, the possibility that I would have to be seen to turn it on my neighbours was a sickening realism.

The poets were lashed against the pyres; one of the Hoods drove the butt of his rifle into Bunce's mouth, instantly breaking the poet's jaw and causing him to choke on a mixture of blood and teeth; his verses were lost as he sagged against the structure that would soon be consuming him. This time, a genuine roar of protest was released from the crowd, which surged forward. *No*, I wanted to shout, *it's exactly what they want*. But the crowd had found its strength, its sense of unity. Bonded like this, how could they be denied?

Bunce was moving against the wood; a slow, fluid dance as he bucked in his choking fit. His face had turned blue, a great rope of bloodied spittle hung from his shattered jaw. I couldn't see anything but white in his bulging eye sockets.

The Hoods nearest the tide of bodies obviously felt the crowd's charge was provocation enough and emptied their cartridges, point blank. Thirty dead, instantly. I tried moving behind the front line of Hoods to reduce the threat of my involvement but new ranks were forming at my back; I was pressed forward. It was almost comic, the way my path and that of Marley's, were converging.

"Mow them down," said a voice, gritting in my ear like shale against tin.

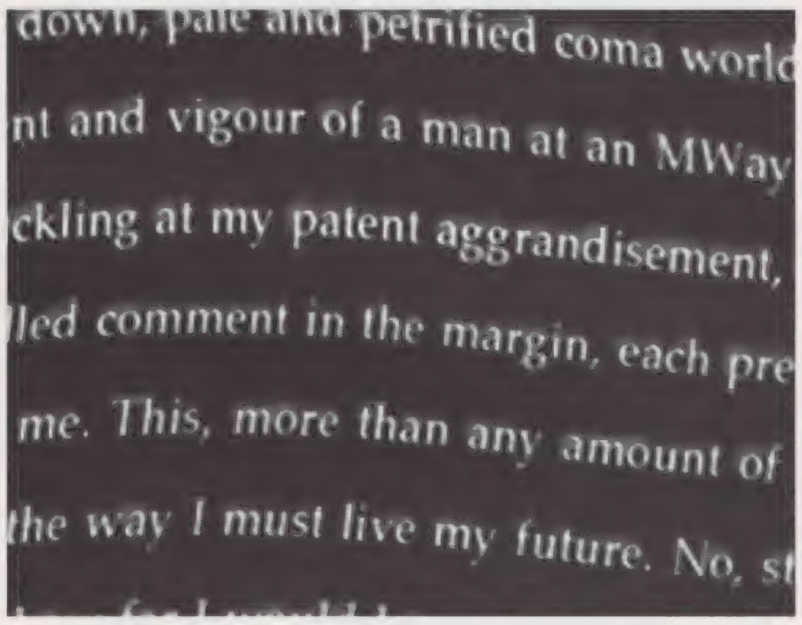
"What?" I said, trying not to laugh at the poetry of the moment. Bunce was dead, toppled over against his bindings, his face black. The other Litcrims were screaming or remaining stock-still, trancelike, as though by forcing their conscious selves elsewhere they would avoid the pain of their deaths. "Did you say 'Mow them down?'" Marley was two feet away from my unholstered gun, her eyes darting over the disintegrating crowd and the wisps of smoke now rising from the bonfires.

The Hood inclined his head towards me, as though scenting a rat. "Strafe," he said. "Mow. The. Fuckers. *Down*."

I looked at Marley. I could tell her to run, but then we'd both be dead. Hoods ganged up either side of me. If I didn't act soon…

I had no choice.

Marley fell apart like slow-cooked lamb from the bone. The Hood at my side, toting his Huebber like it was turning to molten metal in his fist, blasted three more people before the crowd jinked my way, spilling us all to the floor. I scrambled out of the stampede, mere feet away from one of the blazing pyres, its human fuel arching against the wood, a blackened twist. I didn't feel the heat at all; cold lead replaced my bones. I did for the Hood who'd wasted Marley, loosing a shell into the bastard's throat; in the confusion, nobody noticed. I spun away, tearing the rags from my face. Keri was being buffeted between pockets of violence like a steel ball in a game of bagatelle. I grabbed her wrist and she resisted until she saw who I was. We legged it over to the van that had brought the condemned prisoners to their execution site. The driver took off out of his seat when he saw me flash the gun at him and I took the controls, Keri settling into the seat behind me, bracing herself against the handrails as I slewed the bus in a tight arc away from the riot. There was a fierce smell of sweat and shit hanging in the bus but I couldn't work out whether it was the fear we were producing or those who had been passengers just a short while ago.



"We being followed?" I yelled above the din of the engine.

"Not that I can see," she shot back. In the mirror she was a tensed white statue, arms marbled with blueish veins, head turned from me as she scanned the back window. Her hair collected in the snood like scoops of toffee. Her tummy formed a smooth border between her tunic and combat trousers, a glass bracelet circling her waist hinting at vanity, glinting as light caught its buffed green surfaces. I grinned, glad that I'd been able to rescue her.

And then I thought of Marley and pretty soon I was thinking of my parents and I had to pull over and let her drive the rest of the way.

WE DITCHED THE BUS ON YWAY< AND RAN TO Concrete Park. The adrenaline squirting through me wouldn't allow me to be as stealthy as I might, although it took a while to kick in. I felt hobbled by fear. Too much like the guerrilla campaigns we trained for in Petal Dawn. At least Keri seemed alert enough for both of us. It seemed peaceful enough though, and we managed to spot the few sentries left on duty before running into them.

"Why have we stopped?" asked Keri.

"I'm looking for something."

"What?"

"A way in." Frantically, I scanned the wall, looking for a clue as to the door's current position. I couldn't see it. And I couldn't relax enough to let my eyes absorb the colours and find the edges I was desperate to see. "Shit! Rouffe! *Rouffe*! It's me, Cloake. Open the fucking door!"

What if he'd gone? What if —

Keri's hands clasped my shoulders. She kissed me fully on the mouth, dragging the tip of her tongue along my lips as though looking for her own access. "Calm…down …Cloake," she said, in between deep breaths. "Someone'll hear you. Relax."

She drew me into the shade afforded by a shattered ledge of concrete where dried curls of dog shit and treacly hypos were mashed together; the detritus of some bizarre ritual. My breathing was hot and ragged; she was absently stroking the bulge of my crotch through my fatigues. It didn't promote any sexual warmth, just the comforting pressure I needed to bring myself back down to Earth.

"Better?" she asked.

"Yeah," I said, "thanks."

"Who's Rouffe?"

I peered out from the wedge of darkness, dividing my attention between looking for Hood activity and trying to crack the codes of Rouffe's chimerical wall. "He's a friend of mine, got a place where we can hide. For a little while at least."

"So let's go."

"In a moment. I've, uh, lost the key to his door."

Then I had it. The swirl of colour seemed to dim and step back from the door, which was projected in glorious 3-D Technicolor. It was as obvious as a wart on a nose.

"CLOAKE!" ROUFFE BARKED, AS I PASSED THROUGH the door. "My, but you look positively riven! Aw, no matter. I have something for you."

Keri moved past me and Rouffe froze.

"Ah," he said.

"Rouffe…" I held out my hand, a gesture of conciliation. "I had no choice."

"So it appears. Well, I was getting tired of life. Better come in, I have a pot brewing. I take it you'll share a cup with me?"

We went into his study, where the Oldstuff spilled from their containers like unearthed treasure.

"So this is your Gallery find?" said Rouffe, handing out drinks. "Is she worth all the palaver? I certainly hope so. What does Marley — "

"Marley was killed this morning," I said. "At the execution. There were a lot of deaths."

"I heard about the riots," Rouffe murmured. "I'm sorry." He clapped his hand on my knee and passed me a parcel secured with twine. Keri watched with the silent fascination a cat affords a spider. Her fingers moved across the band around her waist. Its colour had changed. Blue now.

I unwrapped the brown paper, trying to get my brain around the fact that, a few hours prior to this placid, homely act, I'd been firing bullets into skulls.

A teacup chinked in its saucer.

"My God," I said.

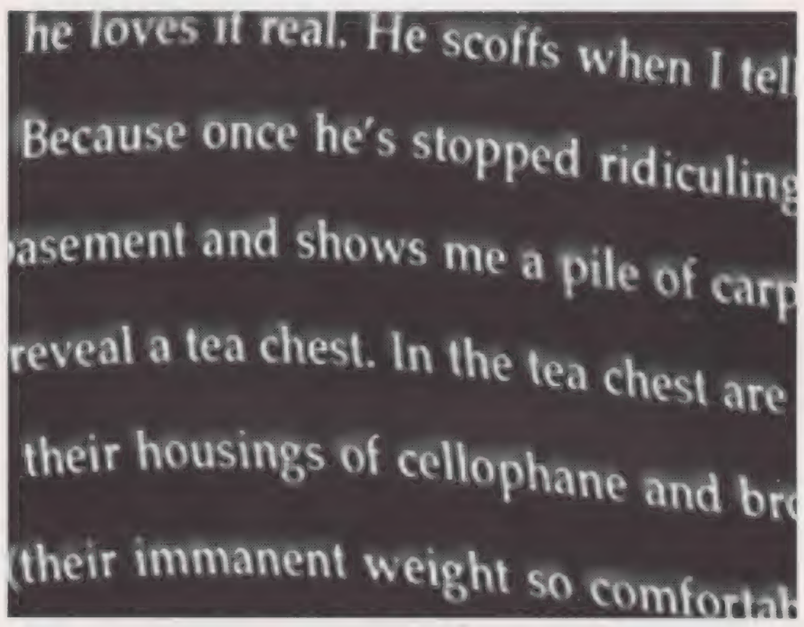
The book's dustjacket depicted a white matchstick figure pointing a gun at the reader. Exiting the barrel was the squared off snout of a juggernaut, headlamps blazing. The title, *Long Vehicle*, screamed across the top of the book in red block capitals while the author's name was a sober thread of lower case letters on the juggernaut's registration plate: *Saxon Cloake*.

I turned the book over and the photograph staring out at me snatched the breath from my lungs. Everything blurred over.

"My God," I said again, just for the hell of it.

"I knew you'd be pleased," said Rouffe.

I looked up at him and smiled, hugging the book to my chest. Then there was a sighing noise, which grew louder and didn't stop until a blinding white light filled the room. When I looked up again, I was covered in rubble, my hands scorched black. Rouffe was still sitting in his chair but something wasn't right. His hands gripped the armrests, his immaculately shod feet pointed towards me. But there was hair all over his face. I picked myself up, tensed for any great shocks of pain, and picked my way over to him. In the near distance I heard voices of intent.



I realised my moment of madness, even as I tried to twist his head back into the right position. His tongue lolled almost to his shirt collar. The discs of bone in his neck, as I moved him, ground together: the sound of a pepper mill in use. Books burned; microcosms of life snuffed out.

A shell fizzed past my ear, whining off a butte of granite six feet away.

"Keri!" I called. She was buried, or blown apart. I didn't have time to search for her.

As I made for the far end of Concrete Park, now strewn with chunks of its namesake, I spotted the shattered trinket that had encircled Keri's waist. I snatched it up, bracketed by explosions, and fled into the coming night, trying to pay more attention to my escape route than the lozenges of microcircuitry that spilled from its casing.

IT'S ANOTHER BEAUTIFUL DAY IN THE METROPOLIS. If it weren't for the cloud cover, the sun would be buoying spirits all over town. My hands are healing nicely; I've been wrapping them in DermSynth tissue for the past week. The burns caused quite a bit of damage to the nerves in my fingers but I can still turn the pages of Dad's book. Returning to Marley's dorm seemed like a bad idea, but I had nowhere else to go. As it turns out, I've been unmolested. It looks like I beat them, gave them the slip. Hooray for guerrilla training. There's spirit in this old vet yet.

It was good, Dad's book. I liked the characters and the plotline. There was a very beautiful passage around a third of the way through, when the protagonist loses someone dear to him and he knows that, but for a different course of action, he might have rescued her. He remembers some words she said to him, from the first time they made love.

'If I never knew you, I would never have known what happy meant. And if I ever lost you, it wouldn't be so bad, because I'd have you still, a little warm spot inside me, for ever.'

Mawkish, maybe, but I cried a lot when I read that. Gummed my mask up pretty bad. Because I recalled, through the fog of childhood and the blackness of the last few years, that he'd once said those words to me. Leaning over me as he tucked me up in bed, smoothed a hand across my forehead. *If I never knew you...*

So, it's a beautiful day. I think I'll chance a walk. Make sure I've got everything I need. The Chute spits me out and I stroll to DWay>. I press my key against the disc of metal and the partition sinks out of sight; I hurry across its socket and wave at Halve as I approach the iceberg of her desk. She's wearing a black bouclé wool-mix belted shift dress. I know because Marley bought one, last time we went to the Bead. It still hangs, like a spinster suicide, in her wardrobe.

Halve sweeps a delta wave of hair from her eyes. "Catalogue?"

I can hear the fans and the subterranean burble of power. I glance over to the Gallery entrance and there's a shadow retreating from the archway.

"I'll have whatever's on at the moment," I say.

"That'll be '21st century post-coercive intra-narrative faction'," she says, and can't even smile about it.

I'm cooling down as I slip by the uniformed goons and stride over the threshold. Her snood's drawn up around that wheaten mass of hair. In the front of my jacket I've got Dad's book and a grenade, which I triggered before leaving. My hands have been burned so senseless I can't tell one from the other. She doesn't turn round as I approach.

"Cloake," she whispers, staring into a smear of words, "I'm only upholding the law. Why can't this be enough for you? I'll have to report this meeting. You've committed a Litcrime."

We stand there for a little while, watching the meaningless ebb and flow of words pared down to their passionless bones. I slip something into her pocket and walk away. One of us has a reason why. One of us has ten seconds left.

I hope it's me.

CONRAD WILLIAMS's debut novel, *Head Injuries*, has just been published by Do-Not Press. Turn to our special offers on page 5!

DISPATCHES FROM THE SACRED COMBE

THE FICTION OF JOHN FOWLES

Nearly halfway through *Daniel Martin* there is a chapter called 'The Sacred Combe'. This comes from the viewpoint of the title character, but it's not hard to read it as a description by Fowles of his own fiction. 'The Sacred Combe' tells of 'the desire to create imaginary worlds other than the world that is the case. This desire, or need, has always been strongly linked, at least in my experience, with the notion of retreat, in both the religious and the military sense; of the secret place that is also a redoubt'. It is 'a place outside the normal world, intensely private and enclosed, intensely green and fertile, numinous, haunted and haunting, dominated by a sense of magic that is also a sense of magic that is also a sense of a mysterious yet profound parity in all existence'. A place where one can hide and gather strength. It is also, in Daniel's (and Fowles's) view, a metaphor for Englishness: an indirection, a subtext, 'the continual evasion of this inner self, the continual actual reality of saying one thing and thinking another'.



These secret places recur time and again in Fowles's novels, as do the themes summarised here: the nature of Englishness, plus an air of mystery. Mysteries have power to Fowles: *The Magus* and *A Maggot* both take the form of mysteries to be solved. Although explanations are offered in both cases, it is the mystery that remains in the mind. Sometimes it is a character who remains ultimately unknowable: Sarah in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and Catherine in the novella 'The Cloud', both suffering from unspecified misfortune, are prime examples. And there are mysterious events: the corpse in the river at Oxford in *Daniel Martin* — which precipitates the one sexual encounter between Daniel and Jane, whose effects linger over the rest of the novel — remains unexplained, as do the disappearances in 'The Enigma' and 'The Cloud'.

Fowles is open about the works that have influenced him: Shakespeare's *The Tempest* is an obvious example (*The Collector, The Magus* and 'The Ebony Tower') as is Alain-Fournier's *Le Grand-Meaulnes* (on *The Magus* especially). But there are cinematic influences too: not least on Fowles's style — highly detailed, richly visual. In the late 50s up to the late 60s, films — European art movies especially — were part of cultural life and discourse in a way they are not today: with the great directors of that era dead, retired, inactive or marginalised, the audience for old-style arthouse fare is a much smaller, and ageing, niche now. But at that time, anyone with aspirations to being a film-lover *had* to see the latest Bergman, Buñuel, Truffaut, and so on (it's notable that when, in *The Magus*, Nicholas goes to the cinema, it's to see René Clair's *An Italian Straw Hat*). The template for the inexplicable disappearances in 'The Enigma' and especially 'The Cloud' could well be Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'avventura* (1960), in which a woman (Lea Massari) disappears on holiday. She is searched for, but never found; the search peters out. The emphasis is not on the mystery — which has no solution — but on the *effect* of the mystery on those left behind. I first saw *L'avventura* when it was re-released in 1995; shortly after Lea Massari disappears, there is a striking shot of a large cloud in a previously entirely clear sky. This scene is recreated after Catherine disappears at the end of 'The Cloud'. Daniel Martin is a film scriptwriter; one wonders how much this is informed by Fowles's experiences in adapting *The Magus* for the screen. ▶

Gary Couzens

Born in 1926, Fowles was a late starter as a published novelist, with *The Collector* in 1963 (although he had begun *The Magus* in the early 50s.) With six novels and one collection of novellas, he is by no means a prolific writer and is as I write this in the longest hiatus (thirteen years since *A Maggot*) in his career. Three of his novels were published in the 1960s and they are the ones on which his popular reputation rests. *The Collector* and *The French Lieutenant's Woman* were bestsellers; *The Magus* has a considerable cult following. All three were filmed, the first two with some distinction in 1965 and 1981, the latter with reputedly dire results in 1968.[1]

The Collector is an excellent, downbeat psychological thriller, but in retrospect seems the odd one out amongst Fowles's novels. This is less on thematic grounds (many of Fowles's major themes are present) but in terms of its approach. Frederick Clegg is a lonely, repressed young man, living with his aunt, working as a clerk, whose main hobby is collecting butterflies. One day he wins the pools. Then he has his eye on a more interesting specimen for his collection: beautiful young Miranda Grey. So he kidnaps her. The echoes of *The Tempest* are overt, as witness the character names: Fred suggests Ferdinand, though he is really Caliban, and is so nicknamed by Miranda. Fowles's work is frequently preoccupied with questions of artistic creation, both literal and metaphorical, and so it is here: a collected butterfly is a beautiful thing, but collection is also death. Miranda is an art student, and Section 2 (her diary) features flashbacks to conversations held with her artistic mentor (G.P.), her thoughts on pictures versus words, and so on. The house where Fred keeps Miranda captive could be seen as a hiding place, though a perverse and nightmarish one.

Another theme not yet touched upon is that of a tension between the gifted, clear-sighted few ('the elect' in Fowles's terms) and the conformist, purblind many ('the mass'). This is not so reactionary as it might appear: it is clear that the elect have responsibilities due to their gifts and for the mass, a philosophy elaborated on in the non-fiction book *The Aristos* and more explicitly dramatised in *The Magus*. In these terms, Fred is one of the mass, who overcomes and destroys a potential elect, Miranda. This is a flaw in the novel: Fred is creepily convincing, but Miranda comes over as just another arty student, with pretensions to match. Fred also offers a view of Englishness Fowles attacks more openly later: indirect, uneasy with emotion, sexually dysfunctional.

The Magus is told in first person, throughout by Nicholas Urfe. Employed as a teacher on the Greek island of Phraxos, he meets the enigmatic millionaire Conchis and his two young women companions, beautiful twins, Julie and Jane. Over the course of this very long (overlong — about 220,000 words) novel, Nicholas becomes the subject of a metaphysical 'godgame' (Fowles's working title for the novel). The effect is that of a labyrinth where Nicholas's self-knowledge and maturity is the key and his only escape; at the end, he has become Elect. Or has he? His progress is measured with reference to Alison, with whom he has an affair before he arrives on Phraxos and to whom he returns at the very end, having learned, and now worthy of her (this pattern is repeated in 'The Ebony Tower'). Or is he? The novel ends ambiguously, though not without implying that Nicholas has lapsed again. As Fowles himself admits in his Foreword to the Revised Version it is a novel about, and probably derived from, adolescence and best read then: an older outlook may find Nicholas annoying and the novel artificial. The novel is set in the early 1950s and is an open attack on the type of Englishness prevalent then — emotionally constipated, privilege-bound — that was in the process of breaking down around the time the novel was published. This dates the novel to some extent, and leads Fowles into caricature, especially the figure of Mitford.

The mysteries of *The Magus* have a rational explanation, but the novel is, while itself not fantasy, both of and about fantasy. The metaphor for artistic creation — Nicholas as part of Conchis's godgame — is obvious: the effect is that of a play in which the audience becomes part of the production. Where reality ends and make-believe begins, no one can really say.

The Collector and *The Magus* are conventionally-told novels, both in first person, present tense. With *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, Fowles moved ▶

[1] 'The Ebony Tower' became a TV movie in 1984. Due to their experiments with form, it's hard to see Fowles's other novels being easily filmable. In fact, the delay in filming *The French Lieutenant's Woman* was in part due to difficulties in adaptation. Harold Pinter's solution is true to the spirit if not the letter of the novel: the 20th Century narrator is replaced by a parallel story on the set of a film of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, the film crosscutting between the romance of Charles and Sarah and the actors *playing* Charles and Sarah, thus bringing about the novel's two mutually exclusive endings.

[2] A 'found narrative', to coin a phrase, is strictly speaking a narrative with no narrator. It is a story assembled from letters, reports, transcripts (these days, even emails), implicitly put together after the fact. I use the term 'found' as an analogy with the film term 'found footage'.

in a more overtly metafictional direction; his gameplaying now extended to the form of the novel itself. In this novel, Fowles plays with the Victorian convention of the omniscient narrator. The novel is set in 1867 and narrated by a twentieth-century narrator who says explicitly: 'This story I am telling is all imagination. These characters I create never existed outside my own mind. If I have pretended until now to know my characters' minds and innermost thoughts, it is because I am writing in (just as I have assumed some of the vocabulary and 'voice' of) a convention universally accepted at the time of my story: that the novelist stands next to God. He may not know all, yet he tries to pretend that he does'. This narrator comments on the action, comparing the events to later history and also appears in person (Chapter 55), depicted with heavy irony as the 'god' of this particular narrative, tossing a coin to decide the outcome. Or outcomes: there are two mutually exclusive endings, a traditional happy one, and a (more modern) open one.

Daniel Martin is Fowles's longest (slightly longer than *The Magus*) novel and has claims to be his best. Daniel is a Hollywood scriptwriter, unsatisfied with his life and his profession, who returns to his dying former friend Anthony, Anthony's wife Jane (with whom Daniel had an emotionally-loaded one-night-stand back at Oxford), Daniel's divorced wife Nell and daughter Caro, and so on. On the surface, it's a more conventional novel than *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, but this is deceptive: Fowles alternates between first and third person, past and present tense, defamiliarising the novel's form as he does so. The novel contains some brilliant setpieces — the opening (I can't forget the 'illicit scalded cream, its deep yellow crust folded into the voluptuous white') and Daniel's adolescent tryst with Nancy, a local farmgirl, among them. Unfortunately, somewhere around the 500-page mark, the novel begins to peter out. This is partly because Daniel and Jane are alone on centre-stage from this point to the end of the novel (they are on holiday in Egypt, which provides Fowles with the opportunity for some first-rate travel writing). Their characters are examined in depth, with a consequent loss in vividness. You miss the engaging supporting cast.

Mantissa is Fowles's shortest novel and a minor work. It is overtly metafictional: an encounter between artist and muse, male versus female. Intended as a comedy, it shows that this is not Fowles's forte. The result is frequently tedious.

With *A Maggot*, his last novel to date, Fowles returns to a historical setting. In 1736, a group of five travellers — two men, ostensibly uncle and nephew, their menservants (one of them a deaf-mute) and a maid — spend the night in a Devon inn. Later, the deaf-mute, Dick, is found hanged. The novel begins as a mystery: Henry Ayscough, a lawyer, is assigned to solve it, which he does by interviewing witnesses and participants. The uncle turns out to be an actor, the maid a disguised prostitute. The novel has passages of narration by a twentieth-century narrator (a more subtle use of this device than in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*), mostly in present tense. The rest of the novel is a 'found narrative'[2] of transcripts of Ayscough's interviews, some letters, and extracts from *Gentleman's Magazine*'s historical chronicle of the months in which the story takes place. The revelation, when it comes, turns the novel into science fiction. We see it through the 18th-century eyes and mindset of Rebecca Lee, the 'maid', a reformed prostitute: a meeting with time travellers from a utopian future, plus horrors more contemporary to us the reader, a Vietnam napalm attack. Rebecca sees this vision in religious terms (the novel takes place around the time of Puritan Dissent); her soon-to-be-born daughter, it is implied, is Ann Lee, founder of the Shaker sect. The title has more than one meaning: an obsolete word for whim or quirk, it also describes — to Rebecca's eyes — the shape of the travellers' craft.

There is no sign yet of a follow-up to *A Maggot*. As Fowles is now over seventy years old, one wonders if and how many there will be. Certainly, at least with his first three novels, Fowles has achieved the difficult feat of combining literary credibility and popular appeal. He has thus had a great influence on many writers, and will no doubt continue to do so. ■

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Dancing with Creation

Mike O'Driscoll

WHAT THORNTON DID THAT EVENING, WHAT I saw him do, was as strange to me as the girl who came home without her baby. When John came home in the early Summer I wanted to tell him about Thornton. But my brother had changed; he'd lost weight and his eyes no longer shone with anything other than despair. He came home stripped of his smile and of his youth, greeting our parents awkwardly and kissing Colette on the cheek; he gave me a brief nod, the way you would to a stranger, and said no more that day.

I had dreamed often of my brother, dreamed him home from London and back the way he had always been. But whose mind was cold as a Winter gale raging in off the Atlantic. Once, I saw him standing in the doorway, pointing an accusatory finger. A knife glistened in his other hand and then began to dance, making patterns all around him. When it slid from his fingers all shiny and slick, I saw the awful wound in his side, and him probing around in there, trying to find reasons for the way he felt. He pulled out a mess of viscera and held it towards me. Smiling, he said, "They're yours now, little brother."

I woke to feel a dark fist clenched about my heart, squeezing a quiet terror into my bones. I mumbled a half-remembered prayer, and demanded of God that he send my brother home and not the stranger I'd dreamed into being.

John had worked the farm with Father. I had an older brother, Noel; he was in Alaska now, laying oil pipelines. He came home every three or four years, but never really having known him, I'd never really missed him. John was different; despite the fact that I was eight years younger, I had always felt that he was as much my friend as my brother. He'd been my source of knowledge, about the world and the people in it. He took me to the pictures most weeks, and gave me all his books; it was John who told me about girls and sex, and to not feel guilty about wanking. He said the proper word was masturbation, and said that most fellas did it at some time or other, and that those who said they didn't, were liars. He taught me all the old stories and legends of Drumassan, of the tinker and his horse who drowned one night in the lake; of the Protestant Squire murdered in 1919 who was still said to haunt the crumbling Rectory; and of the night a burning Blackthorn tree lit up the hills north of the village and how the next day Jack Crowley's body had been dug up from a shallow grave not six feet from the ruins of the tree. And he spoke too of the hardness and cruelty of life, and said that the only way to survive was to dance around creation and never let her hold you still.

But that all ended when I told my friend Georgie O'Connor something I'd sworn not to tell. I never thought Georgie would repeat it, but kids have no use for secrets unless they've someone to tell. When the story got out, John's girl was sent off to England and when he found out, he knew who to blame. But he never did, never said a word, just took off one night and followed her to London. She returned two months later, the baby no longer in her stomach, nor anywhere at all. But John didn't come back, just sent a card to Mother saying he was well and working on the sites, and to me, not a word. Father hired Donie Thornton, a boy of eighteen, to help manage the farm and for a short while I'd thought we might be friends and talk about films and girls, the way I had with John. But it wasn't long before Thornton disabused me of this notion.

"D'ya always have to be mopin' round me?" Thornton said one time. "Is it the way you've no pals of yer own?"

"I used to help John," I said. "He would tell me things."

"I ain't yer fucking brother, so get that straight. And I don't have time to fuck about." He put a fist against my chest and shoved me into the drain. "Jasus, watch yerself, you'll ruin yer clothes."

Guilt lingered in me for having driven John away and I felt I deserved some form of punishment for my act of betrayal. Thornton must have sensed this, and so obliged me with some new torment on every occasion that our paths crossed. Even so, I couldn't hate him; like me, he had a role to play. And then I saw the thing he did in the sultry heat of the piggery. My initial fright gave way to curiosity. It puzzled me, why someone would do that, and what it meant. This failure to understand worried me, and made me miss John all the more. He would have explained it so that the world once again made sense.

Only John wasn't there. But then he was.

WE TOOK TURNS KILLING CROWS WITH Georgie's .22 rifle. We lay in the scrub at the edge of a copse overlooking a field of barley that shimmered in the hazy sunshine. A line of telephone poles laden with glint-eyed birds marched across the killing ground. Georgie had scored five, I just the one. Neither my mind nor heart were focused on the slaughter. I'd hoped to talk to John this morning, but he'd stayed in bed. I'd heard him come in last night, his voice drifting up the stairs, slurred and brutal as he raged at Drumassan. I saw it in Mother's eyes at breakfast, a look that said, "leave it be."

"Have another crack at it," Georgie said, removing a finger from his nose to examine his find.

I took the rifle and sighted along the barrel, sweat trickling into my eyes as I raised it towards the pole. Nothing there, so I swung it towards the ditch. In the two years since John had left, I'd grown used to his absence, found that I could, after all, live without him. I still had my parents and though my sister was a pain, I loved her after a fashion. Life went on, only in different ways. So what was it made me feel so tense and ill at ease? Was it that having wished so long for John to come home, what I'd got was someone else in his body? Like in *Invasion of the Bodysnatchers*. Certainly it wasn't the John that I remembered. Perhaps I was thinking that way so as to avoid the simple truth; which was that John would never again be my friend.

"Christ, Liam, shoot the bastard," Georgie said, pointing to a large crow atop the pole.

I swung the rifle, aimed and squeezed the trigger. Too fast; the bird flew off on drowsy, taunting wings.

"What a fucking hames," Georgie said, laying on his back. "What's up with you?" He took a pack of cigarettes from his shirt and lit one for himself. "Have you ever seen your sister starkers?" he asked.

If there was one thing Georgie always came back to, it was sex. He was obsessed with it. But then, as well that as anything else. I turned on my side, facing away from Georgie. Colette was sixteen and imagined that she had reached a level of sophistication beyond the reach of most boys in Drumassan; she was certainly unattainable to any thirteen year old. Invariably when Georgie and I were together, the subject of Colette would come up and he'd ply me with questions about what colour knickers she wore, her toilet habits and so on. But she held no fascination for me; the truth was, I considered her a bore.

"Do you ever think about her when you're pulling your wire?"

Why would Georgie ask a question like that? Dumb ignorance? Or did he seriously think that was a possibility? "No," I replied. "I usually think about Helen." Helen was Georgie's eldest sister, but even so, I was lying because the girls I fantasized about existed only in books or inside my head.

"That cow?" Georgie said. "Sure she thinks she's God's fucking gift. Head the size of Cork and an arse to match."

"My brother fancied her."

"Did he do the business?"

"Not everyone is only after the ride."

"Yes they are," Georgie was certain. "Except maybe you. Why'd ya always have to be so fucking different?"

"Different how?" I asked, turning towards him.

"Jay, any fella in his right mind wants to get his hole."

I wondered if that were true. "And what if you couldn't?"

"What d'you think God gave us hands for?"

"I didn't mean that."

"What *did* you mean?"

"Nothing, forget it. Do you ever talk much, to your brothers?"

"Talk how?"

"Just talking, anything. Like you talk to me."

"Talking bollix, you mean?"

I sighed. Even now Georgie remained unaware of the pain he had caused by blabbing about John's girlfriend. I'd never pulled him up about it, knowing that he'd meant no harm. But since then, I was more careful about what I told Georgie. For a while I'd considered telling him what I'd seen Thornton do, to see if any of his brothers had ever described such a thing. But the thought of word getting back to Thornton kept me silent. After breakfast, I'd hung round the yard waiting for Georgie. Thornton sauntered towards me from the barn. "Made a show of himself last night," he said.

"Who?" I said.

"Yer prick of a brother." Something like glee burned in his eyes. "Thinking he can come waltzing back any time he wants. He's got another fucking think coming, so he has."

I turned away.

"Mark my words," Thornton called. "Ya little cunt." I left the yard, Thornton's malice sucking at my resolve, thinking of John and of the creature into which he had been transformed. Home nearly a week, he seemed to have lost his zest for life. He spoke to our parents in monosyllables and to me hardly at all. Is it my fault, the way he is now, I'd asked myself, or was it something else changed him? What had kept him in London, even after his girl came home? I imagined London as a vast and wonderful place, a world of punk rockers, skinheads, and other mythical creatures; was it that essential difference to home, that unfamiliarity, that had held him there?

Later, Georgie remembered that his sister, Patsy, and some of her friends were swimming down by the Graney. He suggested we go and spy on them. I thought about going home to try and talk to John, to ask him about Thornton. Surely the bond between us was not completely broken? But doubt festered inside me like a tumour and it wasn't hard to let Georgie persuade me to go with him. As we walked through the fields Georgie held out the promise of a glimpse of forbidden glories. He said, "Sure, if we're lucky, we might see their tits."

I nodded, dry-throated, trying not to think of how I'd spied on Thornton, telling myself that the thoughts that quickened my breath were not in the least impure. Quite the opposite: they were motivated by a quest for knowledge, and what could be purer than that?

MY BROTHER LURCHED THROUGH THE DOOR IN the late afternoon, eyes glazed and reeking of drink. He collapsed into an armchair and winked drunkenly at Colette. He said nothing to me so I pretended to carry on watching TV.

Mother came in from the kitchen. "Look at the state of you," she said to John. "You're a disgrace."

"Oh Mam," Colette said. "Can't you leave him be?"

"Lord knows," John said, his voice slurring, "it's a fucking crying shame a man can't have a drink without being lectured."

"Please, John," Mother said, "there's no call for that sort of language."

"What harm is it?" he said. He winked at Colette again, as if she were part of his drunken game. At that moment I felt torn between my mother and brother, not wanting them to fight, not wanting to have to take sides.

"In all fairness," John continued. "No one ever died of cursing."

"I won't have it," Mother said. "Not in my house."

Colette said, "Why must you always be at him? He's not home a week and you're already trying to drive him out."

"This has nothing to do with you," Mother said. "No one asked your opinion."

"Well maybe you should."

"If your father heard the way you talk to me!"

"What would he do? Beat me? The way he did John, and Noel?"

"Shut up for fuck's sake, both of ye," John said. He stood up and stormed out into the yard.

"It isn't enough that ye drove him away the first time," Colette said, bitterly. "How much more do ye want him to suffer?"

I followed John out into the yard. "Where's the prepubescent off to?" I heard Colette call after me.

I found him up in the mill, staring out an open window, at a tractor become part of the field, grass growing out of the silent engine. John glanced at me. "Jesus," was all he said.

I waited for something more. He lit a cigarette and nodded to where the falling sun turned the tractor's rust to gold. "First one I ever drove," he said, then was silent again.

The quietness settled on us like a shroud. To break it, I said, "I'm glad you're home," though I was no longer sure that was true.

"I won't be staying," he said. "I've me own life to lead now."

My heart was filled with a terrible sadness. I wanted to be brave, to ask his forgiveness, but I didn't know how. "I might go to London when I'm older," I said.

"T'wouldn't suit you. Ya gotta have a head on you, know what you're about and mind that, not any other fella's business."

The implication being that I didn't know what I was about. The bitter truth was that he hadn't forgiven me, and would probably never do so. "I want to say something to you," I said, afraid to meet his gaze. The words came with difficulty to my lips, more difficult even than Confession, and in my head I prayed that he would understand and that things might be as they once had been. "After you went, I used to dream about you nearly every night. I couldn't bear it that you never said so long. I know I was the cause of it all, but honestly, I never meant to say anything."

John smiled and for a moment my heart lifted, till I saw it was a smile of contempt. "Never mind what you meant, you did it anyway."

"I'm sorry John, I thought I could trust someone."

"Trust someone? Who?"

"It doesn't matter, it was my fault."

"Fucking Jesus, it matters to me, it matters that you broke your promise and gabbed to some bigmouth pal." The anger in John's voice was chilling. Bitterness burned in his eyes and I saw no acceptance or forgiveness there. I tried to speak but my tongue felt glued to the roof of my mouth. I was scared, I realised, though not nearly so much as I was scared by the brother in my dream.

John stubbed his cigarette on the sill and said, "There's nothing between us now. There never will be again." Then he pushed past me and stormed out into the brooding fullness of the evening sky.

I THUMBED A LIFT TO DUNMELLON AND browsed for an hour in the town's second-hand bookshop before coming to a decision. I bought two books by Philip K Dick. It was the titles hooked me, and the weird, unsettling images they conjured up in my mind. They were *Flow My Tears, the Policeman Said*, and *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, titles whose meanings were puzzles, the answers to which, I thought, could be revealed only in dreams.

I bought a Mars bar with the change, then walked out the Drumassan road to hitch a ride home. I sat on the ditch by the roadside and read 'On Tuesday, October 11, 1988, the Jason Taverner Show ran thirty seconds short'. I wondered where I'd be in 1988, and whether or not the world would make more sense. Last night I'd sat in a white room with John and tried to make him understand. But there had been some sort of invisible barrier between us which blocked my words. John seemed unaware of my presence. Tired and frustrated, I sat in a chair, isolated, cut off from the world. I dozed and when I woke, there were a crowd of people sitting on John's side of the room, including Colette, our parents, Noel and Thornton. They were staring and pointing at me, talking and laughing among themselves, but I could hear no words they spoke.

Recalling the dream, I tried to make sense of what my isolation might mean. Was I being punished for seeing things in a different way to Georgie, or Colette? If I was different, did that mean they were 'normal'? Was John? And what about Thornton? Over the last few months, I'd become aware of patterns of behaviour into which I didn't seem to fit. Did that mean there was something wrong with me? Simply by virtue of difference? Surely the world could accommodate more types of people than were to be found in Drumassan?

A lorry from Drumassan Co-op hove into view. I slid down from the ditch and stuck out a thumb. The lorry slowed to a halt and the door swung open. I climbed up into the cab and grinned at the driver.

"Been in town, ha, Laddie?" the driver said. I knew his face, vaguely, but not his name. I nodded and showed him my books.

"At the books? Ya can't beat a good read, so ya can't." The lorry groaned, shuddered, then moved on towards Drumassan. "You're Noel Collins's youngest boy, are ya?"

"That's right," I said, enjoying the view. High up in the driver's cab, it always felt more like flying to me than driving along a country road.

"I seen your brother the other night in Tallamount. A fine man. He's working now, across the water, yes?"

"Yes."

"Carpentering, I heard?"

"I think so." I didn't know what John did on London's building sites, but no way was I going to admit my ignorance.

"He's married now, is he?"

"No," I said. What did he mean, John married? Who told him that?

"Christ no, t'was yer one he put up the pole, I was thinking of." He turned and flashed me a yellow-toothed smile. "Would you like a smoke, Laddie? Reach

up there and light a couple." He nodded towards the dash.

"I don't smoke."

"Sound, no problem. Just light the one for me." I did so and passed him the cigarette. He took it and held my hand for a second or two. "So he's with some other one now, eh? T'is a wonder he didn't bring her home?"

I pretended to yawn to disguise my confusion and unease.

"English, is she? Right fast, I'd say."

I guessed the driver's meaning but was puzzled by his interest. Was he an old friend of my brother's? If he wasn't, I daren't say anything about John. Speaking about him had already cost me his friendship. I said, "Sure, he tells me nothing."

"Nothing at all, eh?" the driver said, grinning. "I heard they're right fast altogether, the English ones. Do anything at all, they would, the whole business." He took a hand from the wheel and put it down his trousers, fidgeting about there. When he placed it back on the wheel, he said, "Gives a man a stir just thinking about them."

"I wouldn't know," I said, my throat dry, my mind reeling.

As we came to the lake he pulled into a lay-by. He cut the engine and sighed. "Did you ever get your hole, young lad?"

I shook my head, and wondered if he could hear the heart booming in my chest. Was this what terror meant?

"But I'll bet you've thought of it, eh? Pulled your wire a few times, yes?" He leaned towards me, his stale breath wafting over my face. "By Jesus," he whispered, "I've a prick on me like a rod of steel. What could a man do for that?" I saw his prick standing up through his open fly and backed away across the seat. He grabbed my hand and forced it down to his crotch. His prick twitched in my fist. Fear sapped the strength from my bones and I felt a sense of absolute helplessness. These, I could understand, but not the curiosity that bubbled up in my mind. The driver moaned. "Pull it hard," he said, smiling stupidly at me, then reached over with his other hand and groped me through my jeans.

My mind screamed that this wasn't right and somehow, I found the will to snatch my hand away from the driver and shout, "I have to go now. Me ma and da are expecting me home soon."

The driver grunted "What?" as if startled from a dream. Then, contritely, red-faced, he withdrew his hand from my Jeans and said, "Right, of course." He turned the key in the ignition, pulled out into the road and drove on. He was silent till he stopped outside my house, and then he said, "Be sure and tell your folks I was asking for them."

ONE THING JOHN HAD TOLD ME: BE CAREFUL about who you trust. I remembered a time when it had been easy to trust the world and all the people in it. Ancient history. Truth and trust were just words that adults used to get you to do what they wanted. I sat at the table with Colette's dog, a mean Jack Russell called Kim, standing atop it, ears cocked and lowly growling. I stuck a finger out towards him, waiting for him to snap. Kim obliged but I was too fast.

"Get that dog off the table," Father said, coming in from the yard. I poked my tongue out at the dog. He sat back on his haunches, tongue lolling as if imitating me. Father came and sat beside me, put an arm around my shoulder. He looked weary, the creases of his face lined with dirt. "What scutting have ya been up to today, ha?"

"No more than the usual," I told him, glad of his closeness, feeling safe from the strangeness of the world.

"Oh aye, that bad?" He laughed and ruffled my hair. "You're pleased your brother's home?"

I couldn't look him in the eye as I shrugged my shoulders. He sighed. "People change, Liam, whether we want them to or not."

We were eating supper when John came in, drunk. He collapsed into an armchair and started cursing us for what seemed all the sins of the world. "What would keep me here?" he raged. "When I've made a life for meself? I've me own money now, and I'll be wanting fuck all from ye."

"For God's sake John, you can't speak to your father that way," Mother said. "After all we've done for you."

"Christ, that's rich! Done for me? Kept me working this fucking place, holding me back, ruining my chances."

"No one forced you to stay," Father said.

"For God's sake, Da," Colette said. I looked across the table and saw that she was seething.

"Like fuck," John went on. "And what about Katherine? We'd a been married now if the two of ye hadn't — "

"You were eighteen, for the love of God," Mother said. "You didn't know what you were doing."

"And ye knew best, ye interfering fuckers."

Father rose and went to the front door. Holding it open, he turned back to John. "If you want to go, son, then go. But I won't tolerate that sort of talk in my own house."

John leapt up and staggered towards him, fists raised. "Fuck you and your bastard house, it means nothing to me."

Something in my father cracked and he swung at John. I watched in horror as John ducked the blow and punched Father in the face. Blood sprayed like rain from his nose, spattering his grey shirt. He staggered back and slumped to the floor as Mother and Colette began to scream. Anger and pity welled up inside me. Before I knew what I was doing, I'd launched myself at my brother, fists flailing and curses flying off my tongue. John fell back beneath my onslaught, then turned and backhanded me across the temple. I went down on my knees, dazed. Someone knelt beside me, speaking furious words of indignation.

"What business had you getting involved?" Colette. "Jesus, all of ye provoking him like that." When I opened me eyes, John had gone.

Father sat in the doorway, tears mixed with the blood on his face. "Provoke him?" he said, shaking his head.

"You hate him," Colette accused, before hurrying from the room.

That night I saw the dead. My grandparents, an uncle, a cousin — Betty — crushed beneath the wheels of a truck, others whose faces I no longer recalled, and someone else in their midst, a boy about my size whose face was featureless apart from a smile. Happy among the dead. I woke, trembling. John would go soon, then Colette, in a year or two. One day my parents would die and I'd be alone. Kindness and security, love and warmth; these are the things that bind us. Only there comes a time when things fall apart and people lose sight of these things. I saw it happening, and saw that I was to blame. When I was born, that was the start. Noel went before I knew him; and John was no longer John. The day would come when I'd re-enact all that he had lived through. I'd marry and have children of my own one day, and then one day, they would leave me. When you die, you die alone, no matter who's by your side. I considered this, long into the night, uncomprehending, fearful. What was this chaos that ripped the roots from my world? Was there something in me, something more than mere difference, something evil? Could I ask a priest for help? Seek absolution for not being like everybody else? Difference here, in Drumassan, was no more than a sin. People were wary of me, could look only sidewise at my face, as if I were cursed. I was helpless against the cold hostility of the adult world, a hostility that would one day swallow me up and spit out someone new, a stranger I would never know.

I TRUDGED HOME ALONE LATE IN THE afternoon. I'd been fishing with Georgie at the lake but it hadn't gone well; not only had we caught nothing, but Georgie had sensed my preoccupation and listlessness and had spent the afternoon baiting me more than his hook. "Ya fucking mope," he'd said. "You've a face on ya like a sop in a sow's hole."

I hadn't responded. Suddenly, the joys of Summer seemed jaded and forlorn, like last Christmas's toys. I envied Georgie's carefree attitude, his lack of worry, his unforced smile. I felt that all those things were in the past for me, and that the world of adulthood was one of grim compromise and uncertainty. If only I knew how to resist the forces of chaos that seemed to be acting through me, then perhaps I could reshape the world according to my own will, make it be the way it once had been.

"Sure, if ya had a good wank, t'would do ya a world of good." Georgie was a great advocate for the healing effects of masturbation, but I knew that in my own case, it would take something more. There was so much in life that I'd only recently become aware of but which made no sense to me, so many rituals I didn't understand. That was the key to it all, I felt: understanding. If I knew what things meant — John's anger, Colette's hatred, Thornton's strange ritual in the piggery — then I'd see where I'd gone wrong. I could learn to accept, I could — what was the world? — could be assimilated; that meant I'd be like everyone else. That was what I wanted above all other things.

When I got home I put my fishing tackle in an outhouse, and then spied Thornton driving thirty or so cows and calves into the barn for the night. "Hey, Donie," I called.

Thornton beat a tardy animal on the back with a stick, ushering it into the barn. "Go on with ya, lazy whore," he said. He swung the gate closed and, ignoring me, he set off across the yard and out into the field beyond. He'd finished for the day and was off home, I guessed. But I felt compelled to talk to him, and now seemed as good a time as any. I followed him, not hurrying, but walking on twenty or so yards behind, across the field and on down the valley that sloped away behind the farm, crossing two more fields till he reached the boreen that led to his home. He turned and leaned his back against the gate, watching as I walked down the slope towards him. He lit a cigarette and flicked away the match the way I'd seen Humphrey Bogart do.

"You following me, ya little fucker?" Bogart never said that to a kid.

"No," I said, awkwardly, then, feeling stupid, "Well, yes, I suppose."

"What for?"

My heart beat frantically and I felt beads of sweat trickle down the side of my face. Could I go through with this? Would Thornton reveal the meaning of what he'd done? For a second or two, as panic threatened to overwhelm me, I was on the verge of fleeing. Instead, I climbed the gate and sat on the top bar. A crow cawed somewhere in the distance, maybe one I'd spared the other day. "There's something I want to ask you," I said.

Thornton took a long pull on his cigarette. "What?"

"There's things I don't understand." It was best not to look down; down was where a crack had opened in the earth, dark and deep and dreadful. I was teetering on the edge, but even so, I forced myself to go on. "Important things I need to know."

"What am I?" Thornton laughed. "Your fucking teacher?"

"When John lived at home, he used to tell me things, explain whatever I didn't understand."

"A great one for the explanations," Thornton said. "Oh for sure."

"It's hard for me, now."

"Don't talk to me. I know what he's been up to, all right. Nothing escapes me." When he spoke these last words, Thornton glared at me, as if in warning. "A right fucking idiot and no mistake. Sure what did he want running after that whore anyway?"

"That was one of the things I never understood," I said, feeling intoxicated with curious dread.

"No mystery at all, a matter of hole," Thornton said, bursting into laughter. When he saw that I'd failed to appreciate his wit, he grimaced and said, "What is it you want anyway, ya little wanker."

"I don't want people to hate me," I said, defiantly.

"Impossible," Thornton said. "You're such a cunt that people can't help but hate ya."

I closed my eyes so as not to see his anger. "I never thought John would stop dancing, but he did. I think it's my fault."

"What the Christ are ya jabbering on about?"

"I need to understand creation." I swayed atop the gate like a drunken child. "Like that thing you did; once I would've thought that was a sin but John told me that sin was in the mind. What did it mean?" I opened my eyes; the sky bled into the earth.

Thornton frowned. "You're fucking touched, I swear to God. Sin? All that shite, that's all bollix."

"But what did it mean, what you did?"

Confusion spread across his face. "What I did?" he croaked.

"A while back" I went on, fists clenched at my sides, still swaying back and forth on the gate. "In the piggery."

Thornton's face darkened and his words, when they came, were slow and dry and full of menace. "Saw what in the piggery?"

I raised the fists to my eyes so that I could see the red of the evening sun through the skin of my fingers. I was afraid, but more importantly, I sensed that I was on the verge of some vital revelation. "With you pants down and the pig's back legs in your Wellingtons, fucking it like it was some girl."

A silence so complete that even the birds and insects were hushed fell on the world. I clenched my fists still tighter till even the red glow was extinguished. In this place, I told myself, it was safe to ask such questions.

Then I dropped my hands and saw that it was no longer safe. Thornton grabbed me by the shirt and pulled me down into the field. Half a dozen blows rained about my head, knocking me senseless. "Ya fucking cunting little sneak," I heard. "I'll teach ya to mind your own fucking business." After a while, I didn't feel too much, just heard his laboured breathing as he laid in with fists and boots and curses; but it seemed that I was elsewhere, an unreliable witness to the beating of some other kid.

THE SUN HAD GONE WHEN I FOUND THAT I WAS still in the world. The sky was rapidly darkening and a cool drizzle was falling on the quiet land. I tried to sit up but the pain I felt was testament to the hammering I'd received. My nose was thick with crusted blood and snot, and the flesh around my eyes felt puffed and swollen. All down one side I felt the bruises where Thornton had kicked me. But more than pain, I felt anger and a sense of betrayal. I'd been honest with Thornton, admitting my inability to make sense of what he'd done. Was it right that he batter me for my lack of understanding? Was that what it meant to fuck a pig? It gave you the right and the power to punish the ignorant? If you did that it led to this? Or was there something more? I remembered the rage in his eyes just before he'd dragged me down into the field, rage and something else. Guilt, shame, despair. People didn't love pigs, not in that way; he used the pig, used it in place of someone, used it because he could, because he had power over it. John said once that the world was full of lies; he was right. I lay still for a while, letting the rain dribble between my lips, grateful for the taste. Eventually, the rain stopped and I watched the moon rise from the mountains. I tried to stand again and this time I managed it. I opened the gate and staggered out onto the boreen. I walked slowly along its winding route, up out of the valley, till I came out on the main road about three-quarters of a mile from my home. But I could walk no further. I slumped down beneath a lamppost and felt my mind slipping into darkness.

"Hey!" a voice called out from beyond the pool of light. "What's up?" A voice slurred with drink. I opened my eyes and saw John stumbling into view. I shivered, tried to stand, and failed.

"Jay, what're them tears?" John said, crouching down in front of me, his body rocking back and forth on unsteady haunches. "Been in a scrape, huh?"

"Fuck off," I told him, fighting back bitter tears. If John had still been my friend, I wouldn't have had to take this beating.

"Like that, is it?" John said. He hawked up phlegm and spat out into the darkness. "Soon as I'm gone, everyone forgets me."

Still angry, I said, "I never forgot you. I thought about you everyday."

"Yes, yes," he spoke softly. "Hold still a second till I take a look at ya." He held my chin and turned my face gently from side to side. "Lord, that's an awful beating you've took. Who was it?"

I pushed his hand aside and shook my head.

"Can't say? I know what that's like. But, but..." his voice trailed away in the night.

I looked up and saw tears rolling down his cheeks. "I only wanted to know the things that other fellas know," I said. "You always told me to ask questions, to understand things, not to judge people."

"I did, yes," John said. "I'm sorry, Liam." It was the first time he'd spoken my name since he'd come home.

"I asked a question because I wanted to understand. I don't want to be different any more. I want to be like other people, like you."

John shook his head and reached under my arms. He stood and lifted me up against his chest. "No, kid. Ya can't do that, ya don't want to," he whispered, walking out of the light. "Yer different whether ya like it or not. We all are, we're all fucked up, except maybe you." He carried me along the road towards home, unsteady with drink, and I felt safe and loved once more, the way I'd felt as a young boy a lifetime ago. When we reached the yard he lowered me to my feet and said, "Okay now? Manage from here?"

"Aren't you coming in?"

"It's too late for that," John said. He leaned down and kissed my forehead, then rose and began to walk away.

"Wait," I said, my heart bursting. "Can't you come home?"

He smiled drunkenly and waved. "Some fellas, Liam," he said, "they can never come back." Then he

turned and staggered away into the night beyond our home.

MY FLESH IS PURIFIED, AS WHITE AS THE DAY I was born; the stains are all inside my head. John stands at the door, knifeless, unseeing, lost. Out in the world, somebody weeps in the night. There is nothing I can do to lessen any hurt but my own. I don't sleep but dream instead of a world where fear, lies and shame do not exist; it is not possible in this one, outside this dream. Flames burn in John's eyes, silencing the real things he has to say, consuming who he might have been. I see this even though my eyes are shut tight against life.

The moans of beasts echo through the night. A world seeps through the crack of the dream, and with it, the smell of smoke and burning hide. I open my eyes but John is no longer in the room. Outside, the cattle are lowing and the sky is all aglow.

Aglow like Hell.

I woke with a shudder and opened my eyes to stare through the window at a night sky turned chimney red. Great clouds of fiery smoke bloomed up from the yard, and the night was full with dreadful sounds. I went to the window and saw the commotion in the yard. There was Father hurling bucket after bucket of useless water at a blaze which crackled and swallowed them up, and Mother, helpless and shocked beside him, mute with the horror of it all.

I dressed as quickly as I could, my body hurting all over. I went downstairs and out into the yard where Colette was screaming for somebody to for God's sake save the animals. Her face was black with smoke and tears, and I saw that there were things that she too, didn't understand. And above her screams and the snapping flames came the awful, sickening roars of the trapped animals, cows and calves, as they were roasted alive in the inferno. People poured into the yard, rushing to help my father, throwing buckets of water at the flames until, realizing the futility of their efforts, they simply stood and stared in silent fascination.

I stood beside my mother. She looked at me, touched my battered face but said nothing. She turned back to the flames and I saw her lips move in useless prayer. By the time the fire engines came nobody was fighting the fire. Men and women stood back in weary silence as the hungry flames sated themselves on the bones of the building. The animals it held were all dead and hushed.

Neighbours consoled my parents, as shocked and horrified as they. Others exchanged views amongst themselves as to how such a tragedy had come to pass. I stood alone in the shadow of the house, hearing words like "negligence" and "compensation," and more sinister phrases such as "a bad sort," and "bound to happen." I understood that more than love or joy or kindness, people's hearts were filled with greed and spite and fear. Knowing this, I wanted no part of it. I fled inside and back up to my room. I closed the curtains, undressed and lay down to sleep. I dreamed, but not of John, nor of any other living being.

ON THE SECOND MORNING AFTER THE FIRE, I woke to a sky blue with promise. But it was a false promise. The smell of grief and burnt fat lingered over the farm, and people were still calling in to console and speculate. In truth, I felt, the tragedy had made us into celebrities. Even the *Cork Examiner* had sent someone down to do a story on the fire. I read the paper at breakfast. 'Cattle Burned To Death In Mystery Blaze' the headline said, and underneath it, 'Gardai Suspect Arson'.

Out into the yard I saw Pad the Post, Babs Regan and Nancy Hegarty, their backs turned to me, standing before the blackened shell of the barn. I listened a while to what they were saying.

"They say," said Babs Regan, "they say t'was the son."

"The fella that's home from England?" Pad the Post asked. "Sure enough, there's been no sight nor sound of him since it happened."

"An awful thing," Nancy Hegarty chipped in. "Poor Noel."

Babs Regan leant forward conspiratorially. "Sure wasn't Noel after throwing him out two days before?"

"T'is true for you," said Pad the Post. "There was no love lost between them."

"Wasn't he lighting drunk every night up in The Star, making an awful show of himself?"

"And where is he now?" Nancy Hegarty wanted to know.

"Far from here, mark my words." Seeing me, Pad nodded at the two women and put a finger to his lips. "All right there, young man? An awful thing to happen."

I saw that they too had failed to understand. John was not the only one who had fled Drumassan, though he was the only one whose absence condemned him. Thornton was gone too, though nobody bothered to ask why. After all, people said, what was there to hold him now? Yet who would tell them the truth of fucking pigs, of lonely men reaching inside young boys trousers, and of burning cattle? Who would tell them the things they never spoke of, the things they didn't want to hear?

I forced a smile and danced surreptitiously towards the liars, knowing that I'd have to live among them for some time yet to come.

MIKE O'DRISCOLL's stories have appeared in *The Third Alternative*, *Interzone*, *Back Brain Recluse*, *Fear*, *Albedo One* and many other British independent press publications. He has also had fiction published in the anthologies *Darklands 2*, *Last Rites & Resurrections*, all four volumes of *Cold Cuts*, *The Sun Rises Red*, *Decalog 5* and the two Ellen Datlow edited collections *Off Limits* and *Lethal Kisses*. 'Dancing with Creation' is one of a series of connected stories set in Drumassan, an imaginary village in an imaginary Ireland.

THE REBELLION OF ANGELS

STORM CONSTANTINE'S GRIGORI TRILOGY



At one point in *Stealing Sacred Fire*, the third volume of Storm Constantine's 'Grigori' books, a trilogy which is the major subject of this article, a king's daughter is being told the legends of her people, in particular of how the rebel Shining Ones came to be excluded from Kharsag, the Garden of Paradise. 'They are just stories', says the child. Her mother replies, 'Indeed they are, and yet remember you can make a story of playing with your kitten in the light and shade of your inner room. History *is* stories, some of it embellished to make it more colourful, some of it remembered only in half-light, fragmented'. There is a sub-genre on the borderlines of science fiction and fantasy to which such a metaphor might apply — one whose constant appeal rests on wonderment and speculation as to the nature of history. Is history simply the record of 'one damn thing after another', or is there a plan and a direction? Could its course be steered by master-intentions, superhuman or supernatural? In the history of religion the transcendent has been dominant, and Zoroastrianism, Judaism and Christianity have formulated their various revealed apocalypses towards which human existence moves or is moved. In the literature of fantasy there are cabals and hidden powers, such as the clandestinely operating Benandanti of Elizabeth Hand's *Waking the Moon*, or the 'bent' powers of the 'planetary' novels of CS Lewis. These latter novels, thematically echoing *Paradise Lost*, depict the quarantining of Earth, ordained by Malendil, universal source of spiritual and physical life, and maintained by the angel-like eldila. The final novel of Lewis's trilogy, *That Hideous Strength*, sees relief brought to Earth when cosmic energies (the planetary tutelary gods) are channelled by a small and mostly Christian group which has opposed a world-manipulating cabal serving the 'hideous strength' of an Earth-subverting Dark Power.

The concept of apocalypse has ever lurked in the human imagination. Norman Cohn in his classic study of that phenomenon, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, wrote of the Adam-cult of the later Middle Ages that 'the lost Paradise was recreated and at the same time the advent of the Millennium was affirmed. Primitive innocence and blessedness were restored to the world by living gods in whom Creation was felt to have attained its perfection and to be transcended'. The current approach of the year 2000 with a strange mixture of anxiety, optimism and euphoria in the air is, not unexpectedly, producing a crop of eschatologically oriented works of science fiction and fantasy (and even of speculative science, as in Frank J Tipler's *The Physics of Immortality*). Examples, each offering its own version of apocalypse, are Elizabeth Hand's *Millennium* and Greg Egan's *Distress*, where the culminating moment of change is related to attainment of a Theory of Everything. Of Storm Constantine, a critic has written 'she charms the young and defiant with apocalypses of her own design'. True; yet her own design has a number of components. A specific and distinctive one is the concept and role of the Fallen Angel. In interview she has said that 'in many ways the Wraethlu [androgynous beings of an earlier trilogy] were portrayed as fallen angels', and that 'in Peverel Othman [the fallen angel of *Stalking Tender Prey*, opening novel of the Grigori trilogy] there are many similarities with the character of Cal from the Wraethlu books'. In her 1992 novel, *Burying the Shadow*, the unhappily immortal and vampirish elohim are angels exiled along with the fallen-from-Heaven Sammael. While not there closely modelling her scenario on *Paradise Lost*, or on the account of Lucifer's rebellion and expulsion in the *Book of Isiah*, she establishes some equivalence with the former by appropriate quotations, as chapter headings, from Milton's epic poem. Thus, for the penultimate chapter — in which ▶

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the opposed but reconciled elohim brothers Sammael and Mikah'il, united as a single entity, re-enter the angelic sphere of Elenoen to become its ruler and to break the condition of universal stasis (with the effect of bringing in a new age, with new potential, on Earth) — her chosen epigraph is from the last Book (XII) of *Paradise Lost*: 'Thou has seen worlds begin and end...much thou hast yet to see'. (The angel Gabriel is revealing to Adam the future impacts on Earth of heavenly providence.)

If the Biblical/Miltonic myth had made its impression on *Burying the Shadow*, the Grigori trilogy — *Stalking Tender Prey*, *Scenting Hallowed Blood* and *Stealing Sacred Fire* — carries the impression of a different, though associated, body of Western Asiatic and African history, legend and myth. Andrew Collins, the author of *From the Ashes of Angels*, a work speculatively surveying those fields, is himself responsible for the pre-Prologue of *Stalking Tender Prey*: 'The Grigori Cometh'. There he presents, drawing on geology, archaeology and myth-reflecting accounts in historic documents, the story of an Elder Race of unknown and mysterious origin, the existence of which may be discerned in the 'giants' and 'sons of God' of the *Book of Genesis*, and which is described more graphically in the uncanonical *Book of Enoch*. He speculates that in the aftermath of the last glaciation the remnant of a high and lost civilisation had settled in the mountains of Kurdistan and had conveyed some of the arts of civilisation to the proto-Neolithic peoples of the plains and rivers to the south of them. These originators, the Watchers of the *Book of Enoch*, were of a comparatively gigantic, physically distinctive race. Some defied the ban of breeding with the plains people and were punished and exiled from the 'Garden of Eden' mountain oasis of settlement. The race descended from this miscegenation, and cursed of their parent culture, became the fallen 'sons of God', the quasi-angelic (or demonic) Nephilim — or, in Greek nomenclature, Grigori — of later religious legends. In the *Book of Enoch* a leader of these rebel Watchers is Shemyaza, and he is punished by being cast into a fiery abyss. In a variant version, for having betrayed Watcher secrets to his human paramour, Ishtahar, he is condemned to hang everlastingly head down in the constellation of Orion (a symbolically 'spiritual' location).

This, then, is the mythic substratum of the Grigori novels; but whereas the Earth setting of *Burying the Shadow* was a temporally undefined mediaeval-ish fantasy world, the human/fallen angel drama of this trilogy is played out in England, New York, Turkey, Kurdistan and Egypt in a short space of years preceding the 2000 millennium. We are therefore to suppose that the original Watcher race has genetically survived, though hidden in identity and deed from common knowledge (the 'secret minority' syndrome), and that through successive sleeps and incarnations certain characters — notably Shemyaza and Ishtahar — have, avatar-wise, an individual immortality. Thus, from the start of the Grigori novels there is a mixture of the humanly possible and the mythically significant, and also a variation of settings between the ordinary and the exotic — if not the fantastic. They all are essentially stages for the acting out of the drama of Shemyaza, the eternally sacrificed and resurrected demon-god. *Stalking Tender Prey* opens in the quiet English village of Little Moor with the intrusion into the lives of its inhabitants of a stranger, Peverel Othman, who is actually Shemyaza in an amoral/demonic incarnation. At High Crag, his cliff-top mansion in distant Cornwall (a supposed ancient entry point of the Watchers into Britain) dwells Enniel Prussoe, a powerful member of the upper echelon of the concealed Grigori race which through its Parzupheim international network fundamentally influences world affairs. He is alert to the possibility of Shemyaza upsetting the Parzupheim's desired stability, and he is manoeuvring to monitor activities which they suspect are aimed towards reopening the stargate — a psychic portal accessing 'the very fabric of creation', through which the Shining Ones had come. This is, indeed, the case. Othman/Shemyaza, while not fully conscious of his true nature and ▶



destiny, has been striving through a series of magical, orgiastic, disruptive and destructive acts and rites to reach the stargate. Villagers of Little Moor, some of them hybrid or half-aware Grigori, are caught up in these sexually supercharged operations which climax in a hilltop ceremony of fire and metamorphosis out of which the demonic Othman, eluding Parzupheim entrapment, emerges, somewhat comatose, but taking on his true Shemyazan identity, potentially one of 'light and love'.

So, at the opening of the second volume, *Scenting Hallowed Blood*, the temporarily listless Shemyaza is being protected and nursed by his followers in a dingy Bloomsbury hideout. When he is abducted and taken to High Crag, along with Daniel, his humanly reincarnated vizier, other surviving members of the Little Moor entourage are taken by Salamiel, Shemyaza's 'dark brother' to a different Cornish base. There is something like Grigori factional warfare for the possession of Shemyaza as a princely person of power, this war carried through in a sequence of rituals and sexual practices. Shemyaza, manifesting as Azazel, Angel of Light, descends into the caves of the Lizard Peninsula. He confronts the archetypal figures of Ishtahar, as Earth Mother and as Temptress, and subsequently Shamir, the Earth Serpent, with whom he merges to erupt into the ocean. Their combat creates and apocalyptic tidal surge which resonates throughout the land, energising ancient sites of power. Mythic content and visionary imagery are here so stepped up that the novel's conclusion in mundane feasting and accord between the Grigori factions could be anticlimactic were it not for the realisation that Ishtahar has receded from Shemyaza, that he has not yet pierced the stargate, nor made the 'return to the source' which remains his objective as the volume ends.

STEALING SACRED FIRE
Storm Constantine
Penguin paperback, 360pp
£5.99

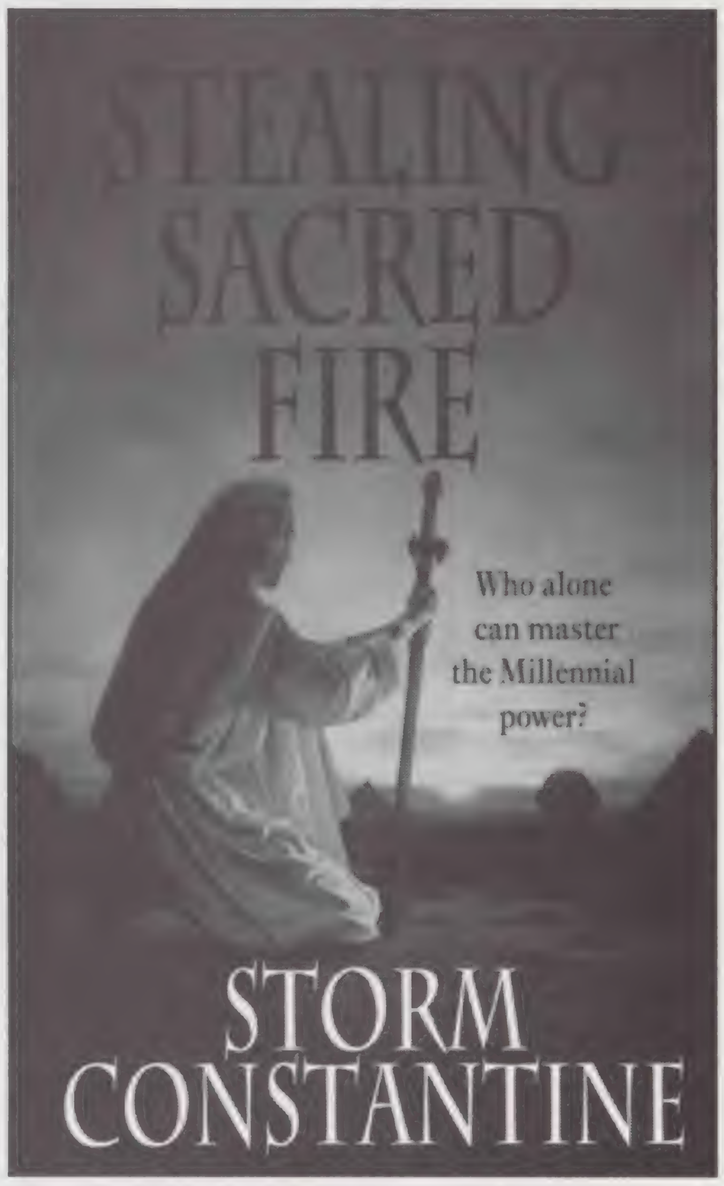
For thousands of years, a remote, rocky valley in the heartland of a war-torn country has sheltered the truth behind the fall of an immortal race. In these mountains, the site of lost Eden — where Yarasadi freedom-fighters battle daily against Western oppressors — the coming Millennium revives a struggle far beyond mortal comprehension. For here, the secrets of the Grigori are buried; the angelic race who once had the power to control the fate of humanity...

Stalking Tender Prey, *Scenting Hallowed Blood* and St*ealing Sacred Fire* are the three volumes of a fantasy trilogy based upon the legends of fallen angels, but set in the contemporary world.

'Storm Constantine is a myth-making Gothic queen, whose lush tales are compulsive reading. Her stories are poetic, involving, delightful and depraved. I wouldn't swap her for a dozen Anne Rices' *Neil Gaiman*

The advancement of that objective in *Stealing Sacred Fire* has a strangely topical/political setting. Nimnezzar, fictional King of New Babylon, is persecuting the Kurdish people, and Shemyaza and Daniel, left in something of a psychic limbo after the Cornish episode, find themselves propelled by omen and coincidence to travel to Kurdistan on the track of the key to the stargate and to the source of being. In the course of this, in a confrontation reminiscent of Elijah's defeat of the prophets of Baal, Shemyaza defeats the reactionary Nimnezzar and his spurious pretensions, instituting a new and humane rule of global potential. He has received a crystal key to the Chambers of Light, its apportation accompanied by an 'earth light' phenomenon, and, in a final ritual taking place in Egypt as the millennium dawns, he sacrifices himself amidst his assembled Grigori acolytes, the knife being in the hand of that 'dark brother' Samaliel. In this way his astral self is freed to enter the Chambers of Light and enable primal light to enter the world. Shemyaza's astral progress through successive portals to the ultimate 'point of creation', and his meeting with the remaining one of the twelve guardians of the Chambers of Light, is a fantastic tour de force, pitched somewhere between the Egyptian journey of the soul and the stargate sequence of *2001: A Space Odyssey*. The company of his Grigori followers, gathered at midnight millennium near the Sphinx, witness an apparition of the departure of the last Elder Guardian and receive, with all mankind, an influx of light, experiencing mystically an ecstatic moment of concord. The visionary Daniel perceives these effects in locations around the globe, and in the lives of the many supporting characters which have been influenced or transformed by Shemyaza. (Dickens created a similar imaginative conspectus in his New Year novella 'The Chimes'.) In a rather mechanically anticlimactic resurrection the newly created Shemyaza emerges from below the Sphinx, but there is an authentic culmination, a symbolic parousia, in his identification of the new New Babylon as a 'paradise regained', in his release from guilt of Samaliel, and in his recognising in the child Helen the bride-to-be ('queen of heaven') incarnation of Ishtahar/Eve. The chapter 'New Epoch', and the entire trilogy, ends as he and Daniel lead the company from the Giza plateau. 'The crowds parted before them. Some saw Christ pass among them, others saw the god Isis risen from the Realm of the Dead, while still more welcomed the return of their prophet.' ▶

In her trilogy Storm Constantine has adapted much of the 'fallen angel' imagery and some of the material background to be found in *The Ashes of Angels*, but in her pivotal figure of Shemyaza she has concentrated and embodied certain aspects of the universal hero/victim/king — the eponymous *Hero with a Thousand Faces* of Joseph Cambell's mythological studies. That hero, in his destined journey, suffers trials, is given keys to power, crosses thresholds and returns to his people and to his origins. In each of the three Grigori volumes there is a major crisis for Shemyaza. In the first (at the High Place pit of fire) the confused, randomly acting, amoral Othman persona is shed in order that the Shining One may emerge. In the second volume, after the encounter with the ambivalent temptress and the subaqueous battle with the serpent, Shemyaza assumes the role of solar king. In *Stealing Sacred Fire* he transgresses an ultimate border, merges with the source of being and, in returning, releases his people from their limiting bonds. In all this, as in every myth of the rebellion of angels (and as in *Burying the Shadow*) there is the pursuit of a major theme: that of a stasis (an imposed and often cryptically sustained limiting order) being broken, so that a new and more dynamic order may evolve. One of Shemyaza's adversaries, accusing him of initiating change, puts it thus: 'we don't want change to occur. Let's just say we like the world as it is'. Shemyaza's attitude is: 'I have come to the land of my ancestors to put wrong to right. I will open up the Chambers of Light and return to the source of our creation'. The rich melange of myth, magic and sexually fired energy in Storm Constantine's novels may lead some to regard them as romantic escapism, and her chosen genre of dark fantasy is certainly a sub-genre of romanticism. At the same time, the tropes and thematic structures discussed here have quite profound psychological import (as do those of other esoteric and 'angelic' fictions mentioned in my opening paragraph). I offer, from Carl Jung's *Symbols of Transformation*, a concluding quotation which might almost be a summation of the subtler and deeper implications of the Grigori trilogy: 'when the libido leaves the bright upper world...it sinks back into its own depths, into the source from which it originally flowed. But if the libido manages to tear itself loose and force its way up again, something like a miracle happens: the journey to the underworld was a fountain of youth, and the libido, apparently dead, wakes to renewed fruitfulness'. ■



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artwork by Wayne Burns



rick cadger's unquiet soul

Time warps aren't science fiction, they are an established fact of life — ask any columnist, or feature writer. It is 11:55 on the morning of December 9, 1997 — but of course you disagree. It's true, I tell you; my wristwatch confirms it, as does the system clock on my PC. The fact that your calendar and your clock tell a different story means nothing to me. I am sitting at my desk writing this right *now*, just as you are reading these words right *now*. Our 'nows' meet upon this page, and the argument over whether I am writing in the past, or you reading in the future becomes meaningless.

'But what's all that got to do with Christmas?' you ask. Oh yes you do.

Well, having established that we exist in different time frames, I trust it will not seem too late, irrelevant or inappropriate if I take this opportunity to wish you a slightly surreal Christmas and a positively incandescent new year. Furthermore, I hope I have confused temporal considerations enough to allow me to get away with banging on about my favourite time of year for a while. Just remember that while it might seem to you that I've missed the boat by months, from my perspective the festive season is just getting started.

As lovers of eccentric stories we TTA readers should all be thankful for Christmas. This is one time of year when fantasy has the upper hand. For a couple of days anyone who has even the flimsiest residual shadow of a soul left in them inhabits a different world. Best of all, this is the time when the TV Guide listings overflow with hour after hour of stupid fairy tales and fantastic nonsense. Ordinary, unsuspecting people get exposed to the insidious appeal of the unreal. The same people who snort derisively at the sight of our genre magazines and paperbacks for most of the year will be glued to the umpteenth screening of *ET*, *Mary Poppins*, *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*, *The Wizard of Oz* and dozens of similarly 'unrealistic' offerings. And if you should take them to task for their hypocrisy, they will grin at you and say, 'What the hell; it's Christmas'. And they will have hit the nail squarely upon the head.

There really is something magic about Christmas. Something in the air. It is a time when sceptics are allowed to believe what they like with immunity from ridicule, and without fear of compromising their principles: the time when rugged protectors of family, home and macho values are permitted to succumb to attacks of blatant sentimentality. This is the time of year that you can have a drink with that gobby bloke from the pub whose face you've wanted to head-butt all year long (and who knows, he might turn out to be a splendid chap after all).

And it's a time when wizened debunkers like me actually teeter on the edge of faith in...something — whether it be Santa Claus, the brotherhood of man or a six-foot tall white rabbit called Harvey. In fact, for a while, we may even tip over that edge.

This year, like last, I will actively hunt out *Miracle on 34th Street*, and I will sit through every second of its sentimental assertion of Santa's reality. Of course he is real. That fat, bearded geezer with his ludicrous outfit is the essence of what we devotees of the fantastic experience every day: a willing — no, a *stubbornly determined* suspension of disbelief. The triumph of hope and imagination over experience and empiricism. The illogical and paradoxical hope that we may not be as clever as we think we are; that there might still be something miraculous that we cannot explain away. Straws for us to grasp at.

Bugger anyone who cannot find it within themselves to fall just a little bit under the spell of one of mankind's greatest, most glorious and most valuable fantasies. For the next couple of weeks I believe in Santa Claus, I believe in Harvey, and I believe that every time a bell rings an angel gets its wings. That is this column's official position on the matter and I intend to defend every word of it, by brute force if necessary.

Ho ho ho.

I'm having a tremendous problem with my lifestyle (as someone once said). I seem to have everything arse-about-face, and try as I might I simply can't get a grip.

I've put on weight, I'm drinking more than I should, people have to say everything to me twice because either my hearing or my concentration is on the way out... And that's just the tip of the iceberg. Worst of all is this sense of fleeting time, and an inability to snatch and tame any of it as it rushes past. I try to make it go more slowly by weighing it down, cramming it full of as much as it will hold (and then some) — after all, relativity theory states that time is supposed to move slowly in the vicinity of a strong gravitational field. Either relativity is bunk or I'm not using it right, because it isn't working.

I have a full time job, and a family (nope, not enough mass there to inhibit that ominous flow). I have additional duties at work as a trade union shop-steward and health & safety rep (the minutes continue to whizz by). I have my writing: short stories, columns and, heaviest of all, several novels in various stages of discontent (tick-tock etc). I rehearse desperately, attempting to learn a set of hideous songs before I get held to my promise that I would replace the departing bass player in a local band (tempus still fugits). There's more; some of it constructive, useful, but most of it trivial and ultimately pointless. All that happens is that I get into a hell of a mess trying to fit all these different things into the time I have and failing miserably. I get disorganised and behind (overrunning deadlines for columns and the like), stories don't get finished, songs don't get learnt, kids don't get played with, union business doesn't get attended to, etc, etc, etc. Instead of achieving more, I achieve next to nothing, and shred my nerves into the bargain. If only I had some hair to tear out...

It's all linked to that obsession I have with mortality. I confessed in a previous column that my motivation in writing is to achieve whatever immortality I can by leaving something durable behind when I go. There is so much I want to do — some of it because I want *to do* it, and some because I want *to have done* it so that it adds to the substance of my existence — does that make sense? The scary part is that I still have a few years to go before I hit forty, and already I'm in a panic about what I perceive to be an acute shortage of time. The even scarier part is that I have had letters from readers (following my raising the subject last time) telling me that they share the affliction. All the correspondents are writers, and a couple are barely into their twenties. Perhaps it's not just that I'm getting old. Perhaps most writers are born with this haunting sensation of their days leaking away. And perhaps that is the source of the pressure that makes us overflow onto paper.

Maybe, somewhere out of sight, a cosmic equivalent of Yorkshire Water are busily plugging leaks in their pipes in order to prevent the precious temporal resource from soaking away into the mud. Despite everything, I rather hope not. Mortality is a high price to pay for motivation, but without it what would we be? Probably not human. Certainly not artists.



wayne edwards's overdose

Having tinkered and dicked around with this column for months, I am over deadline and I have to make something happen *now*. An interesting sensation. Trepidation. Anxiety. *Fear*.

Being afraid should make me feel right at home because over here we are positively *loaded down* with fear. Nobody knew this better than Hunter S Thompson when he wrote the books *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and *Fear and Loathing: on the Campaign Trail '72*. The uninformed among us might refer to these books as drug abuse odysseys. Not true. Oh, there was plenty of drug use going on, but that was not the point at all. Thompson was a genius (he is still writing, but nothing on par with these books from a quarter century ago), a sly journalist with a piercing eye and a talent for telling 'the truth' in its harshest light. Thompson observed the fear that trembles us, he saw the deterioration that was rampant and only loosely concealed in the Age of Nixon, and he reported it in his own cynical way.

We don't have to get in the Way-Back machine to experience similar sensations. In any given situation going bad in the US right now, the tendency is to, first, act like all is well. Just smile, ignore it, and buy something on credit. If that doesn't work, blame someone else for the mess that surrounds you. Someone specific. Someone litigable. If *that* goes bust, you work in broader contexts. Sue 'the tobacco industry' because you smoked (better yet, get the government to sue on your behalf). Sue 'handgun manufacturers' because you saw someone gunned down late one night and it upset you, leading ultimately to your poor showing at the cunnilingus festival you'd planned to have with your mate. Whatever. None of this is new, but both its presence and its depth are accelerating.

Why? This is what we need to know. What the hell is everyone so afraid of? Fucking up, losing your job, going bust and ending up homeless? Is it a simple matter of people covering their ass? Is it about money? Sure, that is part of it. A big part, even. Wealth has been socialized and institutionalized to the point where it is the only thing that is regarded as good. We might say other things count, different things matter, but we don't mean it. At least not for long. It is rather like the difference between a barter economy and one with recognized units of exchange. If you engage in barter, the willingness of your trading partner to accept your goods or services in exchange for his implies and acknowledges that he values what you have or what you are. Your characteristics, what you are capable of producing, mean something to him beyond a given amount of fiat money — he is willing to trade his own stuff for yours. As an economist I can squelch this argument in the blink of an eye, but as an individual I can observe the marked difference in the level of personal interaction that exists in the two cases. Does it *really* matter? You bet your ass.

Society has not merely depersonalized people, it has valued them in equivalence with a stack of paper. Forget Maslow: self-actualization has a price tag. All we are is our paper, and when it is threatened we see not only the quality of our lives degrading, but our very existence as individuals too.

We can stand on this plank and explain anything. We can argue against altruism. We can describe a connection between the public's apparent fascination with whether President Clinton's dick bends to the left in terms of money, if we want. The argument is a tautology.

But we can also abstract from the money argument and look at the fear of losing our identity. This is the predilection, however it is played out, whether through the money machine or worsening mental illness, or cumulative stress syndrome. This is the fear that takes us down, beats us bloody, and leaves us with nothing at all. Whether it is actualized or not, the mere *presence of the fear* is enough to destroy us.

You don't see a lot about this in literature these days, at least not explicitly. Apart from Thompson's work (which, while fabulous, is a bit dated), there is a new book out that can provide a great deal of insight into what fear does to people, even though that is not its principal intent. It isn't a horror novel, though it does have some horrifying moments, and touches on just about every other human emotion there is. Groping for a category, I guess I'll call it science fiction (after all, it is on the final ballot for the Philip K Dick Award this year). It is Stepan Chapman's debut novel *The Troika*.

I shall refrain from describing the book in detail — the author has the most amazing imagination and throws so much at you, so many different ideas and implications and possibilities — since it has already been reviewed at length in TTA's sister magazine *Zene*, but Chapman has constructed an intricate piece of work that is fanciful, poignant, powerful, and, at the same time, completely readable. In it you'll find out all about *the fear*. When you know the enemy, it is easier to conquer.



THE TROIKA
Stepan Chapman
Ministry of Whimsy Press
250pp, large format paperback
cover by Alan M Clark
US$14.99
mail order add $1.24 p&p: PO Box 4248, Tallahassee, FL 32315, USA

ssh...we have four copies of The Troika *available to TTA readers. Only four. First come, first served. Yours for just £7.50. That's a saving of about £3. If you're tempted by this offer, you'll already know that this book is destined to become a cult classic of surreal fiction.*

Justina Robson

NO MAN'S ISLAND

MARIANN HARRIS SAT DOWN IN DR SHAW'S OFFICE carefully and slowly. She felt unable to meet his face for the first few moments as he sat behind his desk and waited for her attention. Instead she looked at the furniture, which loomed large with importance in the moment before he spoke, as if it had some power to determine what was already certain knowledge on Shaw's file. If she did not get this post, if she had been passed over yet again...but it was foolish to be like this at her age. She took a deep breath and lifted her head. Dr Shaw's face was sympathetic.

For an instant, as he began to speak, a flare went through her head as if she were a TV with a loose connection, losing the station momentarily whenever a scene of passion was being played out. There was a sickly plunge in her gut, then the familiar, cold sensation of being trapped as she realised there was to be no escape. Her teeth were clenched as she heard "...suitable to the position. I'm very sorry Mariann. I know how long you've been waiting for an opportunity like this."

In the moment of detachment before disappointment gripped her she felt he might genuinely be sorry. She and Shaw were old friends; lags who had served more than their time in positions below their capacity. This temporal deficit meant they had crossed an invisible but all too real threshold and become members of the club which is universally recognised as Too Old For It. Inside Mariann did not feel old except at moments like this. She looked at her hands with quiet fury. "I can't say I'm surprised," she said. "After all, who at CERN wants a forty-eight-year-old mathematician with a short publication list when they can have their pick of young innovators? I knew as soon as they claimed to have discovered gravitrons that someone with a PhD along those lines would be chosen instead. It's the glamour moment. Worth a lot of grant aid. European money." She realised she was going on too much and bit her tongue.

Shaw took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands. He nodded his head as he hooked the earpieces back on, "I can only guess how you must feel," he said, "but what can I do?"

Shaw was head of the Space Instrumentation department. A minor player. There was nothing he could do. He didn't even see a way into writing real science papers and off the teaching treadmill for himself and said as much after a drink or two on a Friday night. Mariann saw he looked as tired as she felt. It was a struggle to get up out of the chair.

She glanced around, almost lost. The presence of the College, which had once been so exciting with its uncharted frontiers and limitless horizons, seemed suddenly oppressive. Even with the sun shining its colours greyed in her vision. She could smell the floor cleaning fluid and see dust in margins around all the objects on Shaw's shelves.

"Well, I'll see you around, Barry," she said, pretending to shrug it off. Her feet dragged. Today, gravity was not on her side.

"How's the Farsight project going?" Shaw said just as she reached the door.

It was a peace offering. Farsight was her own personal project which she worked on when the demands of being a research fellow and general lackey grew too dull. He had remembered it just in time.

"It's going," she said, putting some carefree tone in her voice to let him know she appreciated his gesture. It sounded lame, even so.

She walked back to her office, shut the door and poured a cup of coffee. As she drank its lukewarm bitterness she looked out of the window so as not to see the work around her.

Mariann had known from the outset that if she were going to get anywhere it would be through the steady plodding by which concrete thinkers made their way. It was the bedrock skill of experimental science, this patient analysis, but mostly it was now taken care of by computer. This left her with writing the programs and analysing their results. She did not dream up projects of great brilliance, she was merely their executrix when the visionaries had shot beyond her into the stratosphere of design. For another year she would have to content herself with specialising in their wake.



The bulk of the Science Museum, opposite her window, was heavy in the weak daylight and the London sky glowered, clouds sinking to scrape the tops of the buildings with their poisonous grey undersides. A spatter of tiny droplets struck the glass without sound. Mariann picked up the phone and dialled her husband, James, at his shop in Hounslow. It rang four times and he answered, "James Harris Antiques?"

She hung up.

He had sounded bored and she found, when the moment came, that she didn't want to say anything. She didn't want his sympathy. Pity is for people who are weaker than you are.

She didn't want to do anything that would make him feel any more tired with her than he already did. She knew that over the last few months he had found an interest in someone else. And everyone else now seemed more interesting than Mariann. She crossed her arms on her bench and put her forehead down on them to rest for a moment.

Voices rose and fell in the corridor; students excited about something, moving quickly down and into Professor Mushtaq's room. The door closed. Silence. She noticed the creak of the radiator, the smell of hot dust and, in the corner, the screensaver on her machine flickering with the colourful shapes of buzzing flies arrayed in the shape of a clockface. The flies said that morning was already over.

Mariann put aside the coffee cup, cleared her desk of papers and sat down to her own work on the Farsight data. She couldn't stand the small sounds of her little kingdom a minute more. If she concentrated she wouldn't hear them. Head up instead of down, defiant, eyes full of tears she ignored, she began the long and careful labour

of removing particle analyses from the vast corruption of the signal from Farsight. If she could have she would have clutched the project to her. It felt like her only friend, a person so quiet and shy that nobody else bothers with them. Nobody else would bother trawling for data in Farsight because there was so little chance of clearing meaningful information with verifiable proofs. Nobody but her. She would make the effort, panning like a lost old prospector trying his luck too far downstream, not even knowing where the river started or if there was any gold up in the mountains.



"You're mine, you forty-niner," she whispered to the jagged lines and traces on her screen as they appeared in rainbow colours, waiting to be thought into existence.

She worked quickly, running programs to compare her rare pattern finds with data from other detectors far out beyond the solar system.

JAMES HARRIS PICKED UP A WOODEN HORSE FROM Goa and gave it a gentle going over with a soft cloth. He wandered slowly through his shop, looking for a suitable place in which to display it. It was not the kind of thing that Mrs Eudora Pope would buy and so it did not need to take up valuable space close to the counter. Its silent history of Portuguese invaders and ancient Jewish kingdoms under the exotic sun of India — which he had written carefully on a little card — would have to wait for someone with more time and less money. Eudora Pope collected female deities and what James thought of as Louis the Fourteenth memorabilia. In darker moments he suspected that she fancied herself as Marie-Antoinette, but this was not a point that counted against her because, to his increasing upset, he found he rather fancied her himself.

The phone rang. He picked it up, answered. No one there. He looked out of the window and traced the fat, tulip shape of the horse's ear with thumb and forefinger as he checked the street. Tourists and locals were scattered in equal measure over the pavements and traffic was thick. There was no sign of the Rolls Royce Silver Shadow.

He was relieved. Eudora Pope was an experience, like the passing of Halley's Comet, which ought to come upon a man only once every seventy years or so.

For ten minutes he fussed with the horse, giving it its own velvet plinth in the window in front of an imposing Welsh dresser before returning to the next item of stock. He was just wondering how much mark-up to put on it when the sprung bell at the door tinkled brightly, like the sound effect to a falling ray of sunshine.

Eudora Pope had blonde hair in a French pleat with a few perfectly placed bubble curls arranged around her face. She wore a charcoal grey wool suit, tailored by hand in Paris and a salmon pink satin blouse. From her Italian shoes to the high crown of the pleat she was every inch the most surreal creation James had seen in his whole life. She wore no labels, designer initials or hallmarks; her wealth of such enormous proportion that it required no authority to validate it. Her face was smooth and beautiful without any particular point of interest. Eudora Pope was a mysterious tabula rasa; a woman of no provenance. She tortured him daily as he tried in vain to invent her history and know who she was. She walked straight to the counter and smiled at him.

"Mrs Pope," he said, with a warm genuine affection in his voice which had taken him hours of practice to assume so casually, "what a pleasure to see you again."

Taken closely her presence was a natural force. It drew fantasies out of him he hadn't even known were there, and he felt himself beginning to buckle already under their weight. Perspiration broke out on his palms and under his arms.

"Mr Harris, good morning." As she spoke she did that funny little squinch of the eyes that people do when they flirt — a microsecond shutter flash in the direct beam. It went straight through his liver and settled on his kidneys. He shuffled as he subdued the sudden urge to go to the toilet. An old boyhood weakness. He would not admit it now.

"I have the item we were discussing last week," he managed to say. "It's in the back room. Won't you come through?"

James preceded her. Since her first visit to the shop some twenty weeks ago he had had nine haircuts, countless shoe shines, many trips to the dry cleaner and taken to exacting wet shaves. He thought he was reasonably presentable for someone coming up to fifty-five and that if only he could somehow get Eudora Pope to listen to everything he knew about her favoured collecting pieces she could be impressed by the depth of his knowledge. He also thought he was stupid for even dreaming that she might give him the time of day, but the idea would not rest. As they arrived in the musty order of the storeroom Eudora Pope's acquisitive smile increased tenfold in wattage and his heart threatened to beat him unconscious.

He remembered he had left the till open but did not make a move to go and close it.

After a terrible moment in which he thought he wouldn't be able to move he located the drawer he wanted and pulled it open. As he lifted out the small statue all that he was aware of was Mrs Pope's faint, expensive scent. Drunkenly he took the statue out of its wrapping and showed her the stone carving it had taken all these weeks and a fresh mortgage to secure.

"An Epona," she said as the silk slithered away and revealed the Celtic horse goddess standing with an apple in her hand.

James looked down at its small, round-bellied shape and thought of Demeter and Persephone, of Venus/Aphrodite, Hera and Athena standing on the dusty Trojan hills. He thought of Boadicea and bare-breasted Britannia and felt himself blush. He looked humbly at the immaculate face of Mrs Pope.

"How totally enchanting," she said, reaching out for it. "How perfect. I do so love these goddess figures. How much?"

James faltered. He was full of words for the statue and wanting to talk to her about it; the wear of its voluminous contours, the age, the passion of the sculptor long-dead in their barrow. Instead he handed it to her and watched her fingertips rove impersonally over the broad belly and the nub of head which was all Epona had left.

"No horse?" she asked, as if in an afterthought.

"She doesn't have ponies with her in any carvings that are legally obtainable at the moment," he said, a slight tinge of exasperation bleeding through which he quickly swallowed as she glanced at him.

"I've seen one, in a museum somewhere. I forget," she said, weighing the goddess in her hand critically. "I'd rather one with a pony." She pouted her lower lip for a second, then shrugged and slipped the fertility idol back into its silk bag, tying up the noose. "But I'll take her." She extracted her smooth cheque book from her shoulder bag and looked at him expectantly.

He spoke in a whisper, the vastness of the sum pornography in his mouth.

Eudora Pope mouthed the words carefully as she wrote. James watched every furl of her perfect red lips and his blush spread over the whole of his body.

She signed and stripped the paper from its book. She had bought two things from him before and the checks had cashed both times. For a moment they held the slip together and she gave a curiously lush, sated smile directly into his eyes.

He could only watch her and worship as she closed her purse, dropped the Epona into her handbag and swung it back up on her shoulder. They shook hands, a lingering grasp, and then she turned and eased her contours through the canyons between the antiques. The bell tinkled.

How long later he didn't know — a few seconds or a minute — he glanced down and saw she had left her pen behind. It was a Schaeffer, solid gold, no initials of course.

James grabbed his jacket from its hook and bolted for the door, key in hand. He put the pen in his pocket, flipped the 'Closed' sign into action and slammed out, noting with gladness that there were no customers standing in his way. He was just in time to see the gravity well of the Silver Shadow curving the corner around itself.

Within a minute he was inside the dusty interior of his old Saab, heading into the stream of traffic.

IT WAS ALMOST ONE O'CLOCK. MARIANN HAD NOT moved from her chair even to refill her coffee cup. For the final time she remodelled the possible pathways for the huge burst of pi-mesons and fundamental particles which Farsight had reported in its last transmission.

She had also called up a plotted printout of a map which detailed those objects which were just visible at the edge of the lightspeed horizon. She overlaid the two things; printout, map. Again, the vector emerged clearly on the screen before her. It was straight as an arrow and its path, once the corrections for lightspeed were put in, was aimed directly towards a galaxy just visible on that horizon — so far away it had no name. Only the slowing expansion of the Universe had recently brought the place into view. Mariann was glad she was not the only one slowing down.

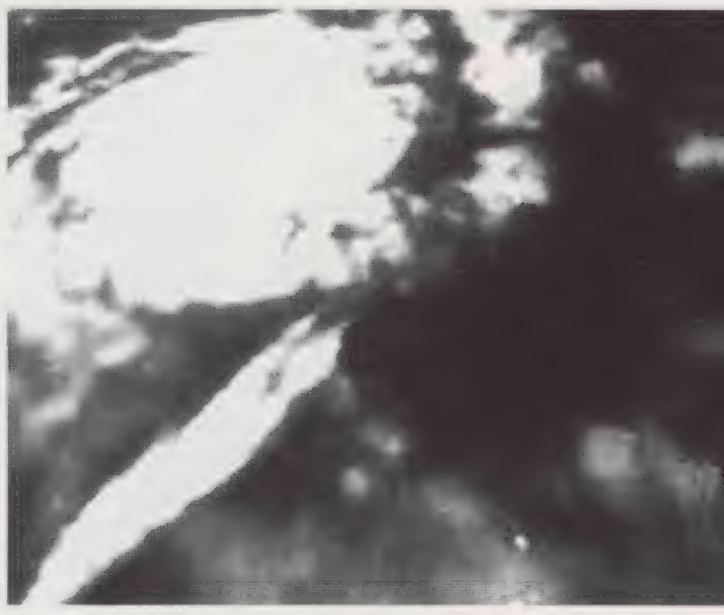
She peered at the blob of the galaxy but there was no information to be had about it other than that it was there, or had been there once. Thinking about it reminded her of James. All those haircuts, those careful combings to hide what had once been his hairline, the sudden efforts to erase the passage of time. She scowled and pushed the map aside.

A sense of frightening isolation had suddenly come over her. It was due to the combination of what she saw on the screen and that sudden vision of James. She was only too well aware that the pleasure of joy in aloneness comes from not really being alone. James had always been there, like cosmic radiation, bathing her from a distance in security. They were one another's support, for all that they spent their lives as private collectors who kept their experiences to themselves. This being private had drawn them together in the first place. The bliss of not having to explain oneself! Other men Mariann had known were always more demanding, wanting to know all about what she was thinking, not able to understand the satisfaction of a secret treasure, an insight which was not named and accepted into the canon of a group mind. Taken over. Invaded. Stolen.

Mariann glanced back to her screen. There was no doubt at all about the conclusion of these calculations. Something fast and deadly had passed within a hairsbreadth. Something which controlled exotic dark matter and exerted gravitational forces big enough to bend space to its will. An infinitesimal strip of the Milky Way's arm had come in its way and been redispersed as energy and subatomic debris. The Alcubierre calculations worked out. She was looking at the path of a warp ship.

Written up as a paper the discovery was worth a whole new world of possibility. Everyone would want her, everyone envy her discovery. And then they would take it.

Mariann closed her mind around it jealously. She switched off the computer and the coffee-machine, picked up her bag and went home.



JAMES WATCHED EUdora Pope step out of the Silver Shadow and trot up the steps into one of the capital's most exclusive restaurants. He felt sick with anticipation.

He double-parked the Saab and darted towards the entrance. He had no idea what he would say, all he could think of was that she might smile with gratitude. Momentum carried him up the steps. He had hardly reached the top when she appeared suddenly in the doorway. A man was with her. He was young, James noticed in the fraction of a second's grace he had — twenty five or less, elegant in an expensive suit. Neither of them were looking at him so that he had to tap Eudora Pope on the arm as she descended. Foolishly he held out the pen.

She glanced around with a frown, wondering who was being so rude, and her eyes fixed on him with a flat stare.

James thrust the pen forwards at her with an unplanned jerk so that she drew back against her companion. "Mrs Pope. Your pen. You left it behind."

She was staring at him with complete ignorance, her only expression that of utter disdain that he, whoever he was, could be so crass as to approach her this way. In that moment it occurred to him that he was so unimportant to her that out of context she didn't even recognise him. He stood there, stunned and trapped by forces beyond his comprehension as the young man took her arm and steered her away to a waiting taxi.

But you do have affairs. You do have a life, of a kind, James thought to himself before the paralysis broke. He hoped she wouldn't realise who he was and that she would never come back to the shop. Then he glanced down at the pen in his hand. It was plain lined, clean and functional. Abruptly he thought of Mariann.

He turned to the doorman and thrust the pen towards him with such firmness that the man took it on reflex. Then he drove home.

WHEN JAMES ARRIVED HE WAS SURPRISED TO SEE Bing, the labrador, outside playing in the garden with her tennis balls. She bounded up to him, tail wagging. Then he noticed Mariann's car parked around the side of the house and was jerked out of his self-absorption by a fresh bout of anxiety. He ruffled Bing's furry head and hurried indoors.

Mariann was sitting in the dining room with an untouched glass of water beside her. She sat still and looked out into the back garden.

"Are you all right?" he asked quickly, relieved to see her.

"I'm fine," she said.

"What are you doing home so early. It's lunchtime," he added, already realising she might very well ask the same thing.

"I've finished," she said. She sounded far away. "I got to the end of the Farsight thing."



Vaguely he remembered her mentioning it over the months; the monotony of the data, the finds that turned out to be mistakes in the equations, the despair, the hope. "You found something, for real?" he asked. He hoped it was real. He gathered from her voice she hadn't got the job but because she hadn't mentioned it he couldn't offer her any consolation. He wished he could touch her but she was stiff as a board.

Mariann kept looking at the garden. She addressed herself equally to it and to him, her tone matter-of-fact: "It was the residual pathway of a ship travelling in an Alcubierre warp."

He didn't understand it at first. When he did it was as if space ballooned and he saw a gap between them so massive that there was no way across. His own day, the giddy feeling that he might, eventually, dare to leave Mariann, gaped in his mind like a clown-faced joke. The enormity of what she had said seemed inconceivable. He had thought of foolish things whilst she had discovered a secret that would change the world forever. Abruptly he felt the need to sit down and pulled out the chair at the head of the table, falling into it.

Mariann glanced at him and smiled, friendly but wistful. He wondered why. "Aren't you pleased?" he asked.

"No," she said. "I was at first. I thought it would show those stupid asses over at CERN what they'd missed out on. Show everyone. But then I thought — whoever it was out there, they passed us by and they didn't even notice us. There's no way a ship in warp could notice us. We were road furniture. Any closer and we'd have been road-kill. You see? It's useless knowledge. They've gone. A long time ago. Understand? It doesn't matter."

James was still grappling with the concept. "But that's other life," he said slowly. "We are not alone. Mariann. Other people. Other, *things*." He looked at her, thunderstruck, feeling more stupid every moment under the patience of her gaze.

"Yes, we are alone," she said, laughing without any humour in contempt of herself and of the vanished travellers. "They were on their way somewhere else. Somewhere more interesting." She pushed the water glass further away from her. "All that my discovery means is that particle physics is on the right track and that technologically it is possible, in this Universe, to create and use a warp to move big distances if you have somewhere to go. We don't even know where to go."

He didn't know what stunned him more — her words or the calm, measured way she said them. The dining room was quiet. Outside he could hear Bing barking. In the garden the flowers nodded in agreement with the breeze. He suddenly realised she hadn't told anyone but him. That they were the only two people in the world who knew.

"Mariann," he began, reaching out his hand towards her.

She said, "And I thought about a new universe, with aliens in it. Imagine. Religious outcries, political ground-grabbing, the scurrying rat race to assimilate and take control of what it means. There would be a new burst of energy for space travel, money poured into contact attempts, billions wasted because we want those powers for ourselves, without finding them out for ourselves. Wonderful. Horrible. And we would always be waiting, like rabbits on the road wondering what the shining lights are. Watching the skies, scrabbling for a defence — James, think what it would make of us all."

He sat back a little bit and put his face in his hands. Behind his eyes he felt the terrible contrast of distance between them and the aliens, so near and yet so far; almost within reach, but out of reach forever. "Oh," he said, and he thought he sounded like a child when it discovers that there isn't a person somewhere in the world who knows everything.

He pictured a ship of terrible aspect, shaping space to make a sailing channel, laying waste to everything in its path. He saw a Silver Shadow sporting bull bars. He saw Eudora Pope's face rapt on the trail of another acquisition.

"If they come back..." he speculated.

"They'll probably run us over with a quark-gluon plasma," Mariann said with satisfaction. "Let's hope this isn't going to become the M25."

"Oh," he said again. He felt pity for the Earth, so small and vulnerable, alone in the vastness of space, nobody knowing it existed or caring to look. He glanced into Mariann's eyes and saw himself mirrored there. A friendly feeling passed between them and she smiled. He took her hands in his. They sat together, alone in their thoughts, sharing the knowledge.

"But you'll have to tell them?" he asked eventually.

"I came home to think about it." She sighed an awkward sigh and composed herself. "I wondered — what is it like to be neglected and know that you're completely overlooked? Easy to answer," she snorted a quick self-deprecatory breath. "Was it time to get my vengeance and share this feeling? Tell the world that all their self-important posturing doesn't matter? That we weren't worth a look? I wanted to. I would have enjoyed it. For a minute or two."

James rubbed her fingers gently. "It's a terrible feeling," he said and glanced down with guilt.

Bing appeared at the window, a green ball in her mouth, paws on the sill. Her tail wagged back and forth mightily as she grinned at them.

"But, yes," Mariann said distantly, "I expect I will have to, eventually."

Bing chased away across the lawn, rummaging under the rhododendrons, snuffing under the fence.

James smiled at her. "You don't know what ails you, do you dog? Do you?"

JUSTINA ROBSON's 'No Man's Island' was written during her stay at the famous Clarion West writing course in America.

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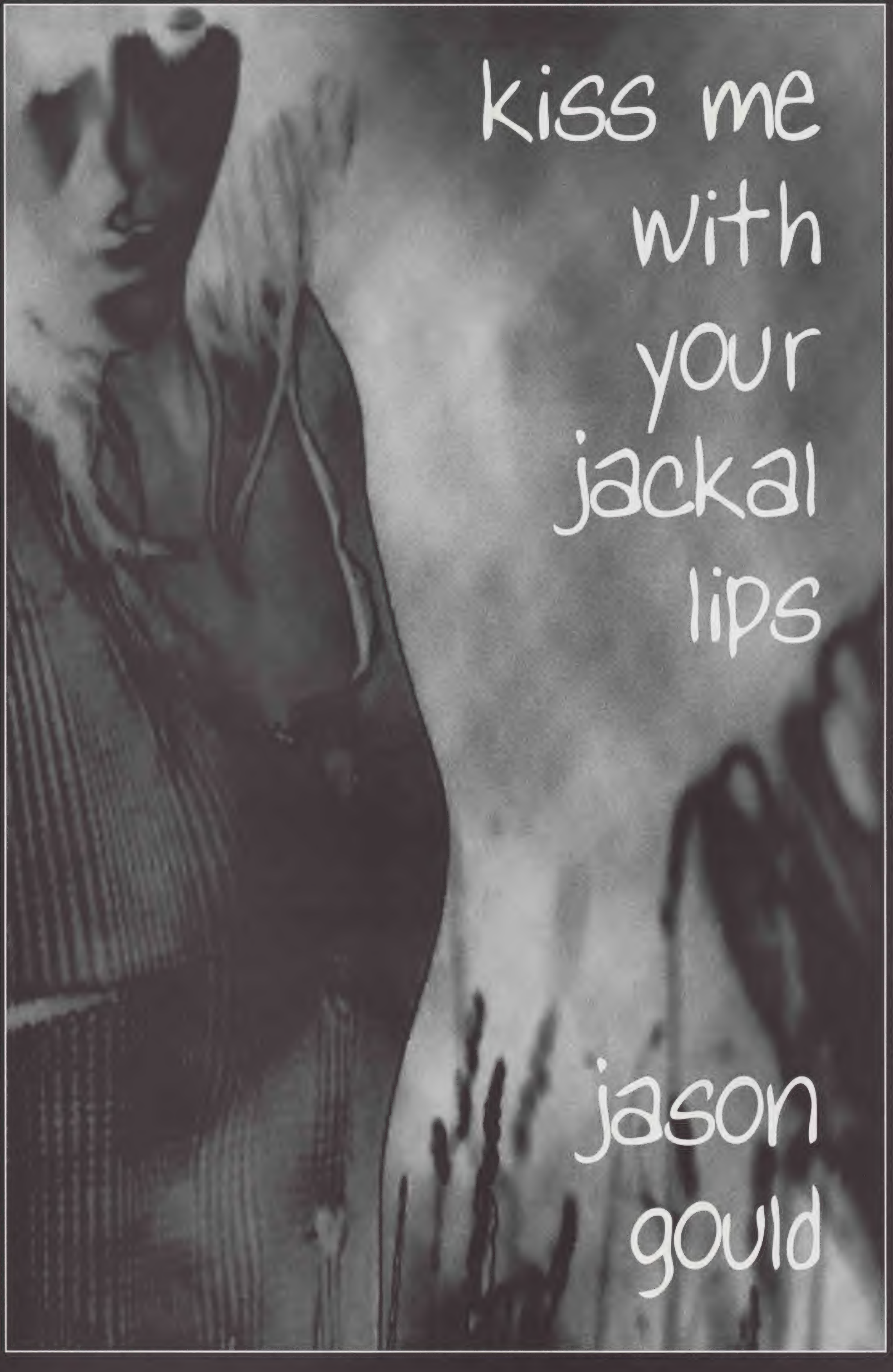
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with
your
jackal
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gould

WHEN MY FATHER'S LEGS COULD NO LONGER carry him I became responsible for delivering the whisky on the last day of the month. I would usually have to remind him that it was due, and after he'd sworn for a couple of minutes he'd unroll a coil of banknotes from his money belt and tell me to buy the cheapest bottle in the store.

My uncle lived five kilometres from the city, in stillness and solitude, in a place where the trees still had birds, and the barns secrets.

Once a month I made the journey out of town and along that lane, a bottle of unlabeled scotch in one hand and a whittled stick in the other, ready for the snakes that frequently slithered from the shade at the crunch of passers-by.

I would step onto his creaking porch and tap gently on the door, then slide open both screens and go inside. There was a faded picture of Elvis tacked up in the hallway, and the sound of a gramophone could always be heard crooning from somewhere deeper inside the house.

Without a doubt my uncle would be watching television, perhaps forcing a strip of twine into the barrel of a shotgun or ignoring the text in a copy of *Hustler*. Being in that room was like being smeared with warm earth, so I would give him his payment as quickly as I could then break into a jog the second the sun hit my head.

He never said much. Apparently when my mother died he just shrugged and went back to his card game. I think he was jealous of losing a brother to the sentimentalism of marriage and so didn't care for me or my ma.

But then, a week before my fourteenth birthday, after I'd dropped the liquor into his lap, he called me back to his chair.

"Tell your father the fee's doubled. Two bottles a month."

"Okay," I said.

I began to retreat, treading through piles of cigarette tabs and greasy half-eaten tubs of noodles.

"You're getting old…" he continued, extending my visit, "your pa introduced you to women yet?"

Slightly stunned, I replied that he hadn't.

"Well, when I was your age our father rented your pop and me a girl from Phoenix. Almost broke her we did. But she'll have mended. Everything mends…"

I shifted nervously. On the muted television a man on a children's programme was pretending to be a panther.

"How about you?" he asked. "You ready for action?"

"I…"

"Of course you are. You're my brother's son; you've got my blood in those veins."

He stood up and led me out into the garden. His boot-heels were harsh on the veranda then soft on the dusty soil. In the natural light I could see that his shirt, parted in a V as far as his naval, clung wetly to his armpits and ribs.

He swayed as we proceeded into the depths of his yard, light-headed not through alcohol but sunless TV, cheap chewing tobacco and the faded covers of second-hand skin mags.

We walked parallel to the white peeling fence, the ground dotted with punctured cans and spent cartridges. We seemed to walk for ages, passing fractured windscreens and bent car doors, radiators and gaskets and a broken pinball machine called *Rock 'N' Roll*.

Pretty soon, nettles were the last vestige of nature. The further we went the less of the earth was visible, and the more conscious I became of my uncle's proximity, of his shoulder brushing against the side of my head, the absence of anyone else…

We stopped at the perimeter of his land, in front of a dilapidated motorhome. Trees arched over its roof, camouflaging its shape with their branches. The fender from an automobile had been suspended above the entrance like a grin; stuck to it was a sticker that said: *I ♥ New York*. Through the open door drifted an aroma like hot, unwashed feet.

"Go on…" said my uncle. When I didn't move he nudged me forward. "She doesn't bite…not unless you want her to." Though he was standing behind me I knew he'd winked at that last remark.

I paced forward and peered through the door into the greyness. It reminded me of my uncle's house, the way sunshine and sky were unwelcome and kept at bay by curtains and carpets nailed across the windows. My eyes found it difficult to apply form to anything; there were shadows everywhere, layers and layers of them, all concealing whatever it was my uncle wanted me to see.

Aided by a hand cupped over my eyes, I was able to perceive how the interior had been fashioned into a kind of nest: the base an oval mould of mud, shit and straw, the upper section a bed of leaves and bracken.

Adding my other hand to the visor created by the first, I looked closer.

Although its gender was at initial glance ambiguous, I could tell by its posture and the way it moved that the inhabitant of the van was female. She was naked, about the same age as me, and at this moment padding round and round on her hands and knees sniffing the floor for a comfortable spot. I found this unsettling to watch. She had a human anatomy — arms, legs, hands and feet, complete with all the correct proportions and symmetries — yet she was rooting around like a canine. Thankfully, her quest was short-lived. But as she dizzied herself in ever-quickening circles — lying finally with her hands side by side and her chin resting where they met — the sun caught her face and I noticed how feral her physiognomy was, how her nose pushed outwards and her lips seemed to stretch all the way up her cheeks to her yellowing molars.

"It's daytime," said my uncle, "she's more supple before nightfall. Go on. I've got her ready for you. You won't ever want a normal girl after the Jackal."

At her name, she lifted her head and cocked it. Her eyes shone in the gloom, wet and intelligent.

I darted aside and ran back the way we'd come. He called me a son of a bitch and tried to catch me, but there wasn't enough sobriety left in his legs. I heard the crash of metal as he careened around the yard, attempting to run when he'd hardly bothered walking in years.

But if he'd been fit enough to sprint he wouldn't have caught me anyway. I was long gone; back up the lane and onto the highway, stopping only when I'd reached the sanctuary of wasteland at the corner of my street, lungs, throat and belly aflame.



I'VE ALWAYS SUBSCRIBED TO THE OPINION THAT God's clay was blemished by grit, that one or two toxins got mixed in there by accident. I know, it's a stupid theory; but it *would* explain why some people behave the way they do.

I was on the corner of my street, slumped in the shade of an abandoned refrigerator, chewing over the afternoon's proceedings.

What I'd witnessed had deeply disturbed me. I couldn't get it out of my mind, couldn't forget the dirt I'd seen on its face, the mud on its teeth, the lipstick my uncle had put on its lips in readiness for me…

He'd been so blasé, so unruffled by the entire scenario.

It was wrong.

Part of me, I had to admit, was intrigued. He'd referred to the girl in the van as 'The Jackal'. The name was evocative of comic book characters, of monsters in horror movies shipped back from stinking jungles to wreak havoc in metropolis.

But my feelings were more hollow than fascination. I felt the same as I had when my father had come back from *St. Johns*; expecting him to burst through the door with my mother pale but cured on his arm, only to have him stagger home drunk, alone and silent. The experience also had emotional echoes of when our dog had grown old and dangled froth, and how I'd woke up one Sunday to the indisputable knowledge that if I called him he would not come, not then, nor ever.

But both those consequences were immutable. One delivered by fate, the other time. The girl he'd led me to had been young, and surely fate couldn't spawn that much contempt.

And I was sure it was wrong; and that if I didn't do something about it I would somehow be punished in later life.

So I decided to wait until the sun had vanished completely behind the buildings, taking with it my uncle's vigilance, then wander back for another glimpse at the pet I'd never known he had.



UNSURE OF WHAT I INTENDED ON DOING ONCE inside her den, I opted for food. I purchased an apple and a packet of biscuits from the 7–11, considered calling my father but refrained, then set off into the countryside.

I'd never been out of town after sunset and the soundless landscape was eerie. As my journey advanced night pricked the sky and darkness flowed through. Soon, shadows had bled everywhere, and after the earlier events I couldn't help but wonder what breeds dropped to their knees and rutted in the starlight, couldn't help but speculate on how many corpses chewed soil in the fields or gulped rain in the ditches.

The only noise on my uncle's farm was of some creature ransacking the garbage bags, plus the continual drone of his power generator. He wouldn't see me; he'd be sprawled out in the flicker of the tube, eyelids glued shut by Buds and Chinese and forties reruns.

I moved alongside the house and into the yard. The moon and trees tessellated a partial path, which I followed until emerging from the amalgamated rubbish of his life and standing eventually in the same spot to which I'd earlier been marched.

Since all my trips out there had been in daylight I hadn't realised how bright the moon would be. It illuminated the entrance of the motorhome and the majority of the surrounding area.

The setting sun had taken the various scents of the day with it; all but one, an aroma that was half urinal, half glandular. As I stepped closer it gained strength. *This is my territory*, it warned, *my cell, my world.*

Nevertheless, I crossed the threshold.

It took a moment for my vision to compensate for the lack of light, and when it did my heart thumped at the many dark corners in which I was certain things crouched. I'd always been advised that sudden movements were foolish when faced by any species of animal, so rather than dart for the exit I waited for her to come and sample, and hopefully approve, my odour.

But nothing unfolded itself, nothing stirred, or sniffed.

I realised that she wasn't there, that the smell I'd smelt that afternoon was not as rich tonight.

He lets her out after dark, I thought. Or persuades her into his house? The basement? His bed?

I turned to go and she was stooping in the exit, staring up at the intruder in her home.

The moon offered of her a more detailed view than the sunshine had. I could see now that she was indeed part girl and part jackal; only the jackal part looked *learnt*, as if all the lies she'd heard over the years had been absorbed and believed and somehow sent down into her maturing body. So far, her hormonal alteration had been subtle: through a gap between her jaws there panted a long wide tongue, pink and shiny with saliva; her ears were conical and narrow, and pricked — I imagined — when called, flattened when chastised; on her shoulders and belly was the merest suggestion of black-brown hair, and on her shins and forearms a much courser stubble had begun to break through.

She didn't attack me, but straightened her stance like a child playing adult, and offered me a faint, timid smile. It was an authentic smile, as if her mastering of the technique was recent and as yet she hadn't used many up.

As she climbed onto the upturned orange crate, and thus into the van, I noticed blood on the inside of her legs.

Originally I thought she'd been injured; but then I realised it was the blood of her cycle, discarded, like everything else her body slung out, wherever she happened to be when it chose to erupt.

I side-stepped to let her in. She slumped onto the bed, her left foot bending upwards to scratch an itch not far from her crotch. Skin relieved, she produced a collar from somewhere in the nest and slotted it neatly around her neck; that secured, she passed a heavy chain through a hook in its centre and, pulling either end, wound its slack around a pair of hooks riveted into the wall.

Remembering the food, I took it out of my pocket. I'd eaten a couple of the biscuits during the journey but she ignored those anyway, preferring to feed on the apple and cleaning her chin in the process. She ate it to the core, then bit that in two and swallowed the halves. Satisfied, she laid on her back and opened her legs. When I failed to respond she widened their girth as far as she could, lifted her hips off the ground, and with a tiny circular motion gave me basic instruction in what I should do.

"No," I said. "The apple was a gift."

She looked confused. But then, thinking she'd worked out why I hadn't unfastened my jeans, she rolled onto her side and prised apart her filthy buttocks, all the time peering at me patiently over her shoulder.

This was obviously what I desired if I didn't fancy the other; this was the *special* way, the way he'd taught her when he'd become apathetic, when he'd fatigued of the conventional and turned to the twisted to respark his fire.

Acid from my stomach entered my throat. I went outside.

She untethered herself and sat in the doorway watching me. Unsure of what I should do, I gave her the rest of the food. She detested the sweet stuff and spat it out after one bite.

"What's your name?" I asked, not even knowing if she could speak.

She declined from answering so I told her mine. "I'm Scott," I said, taking her hand and delicately shaking it. She guided my fingers up to her left nipple. "No," I said, snatching my hand away, "I want to help…"

Her eyes dampened at my lack of sexual proclivity. I thought of my mother's eyes when she'd cooked, and my father, in retribution for some petty quarrel, had refused to eat it.

I snapped a twig from a bush and scrawled my name on the ground.

"You write…" she said, her throat husky.

"And you speak…"

She hopped off the step and knelt by my name, tracing each letter with her fingertips.

"Scott," I said.

"Scott," she repeated.

"What's *your* name?" I asked.

"Jacqueline."

"Jackal?"

She nodded.

"Where are you from?"

"Here," she replied, indicating the mobile home and the trees and flora behind it.

"And *before* here?"

She gave a quick shrug. "I don't remember very well. I was young. There was sawdust, lots of sawdust, and pain across my back."

I moved behind her and saw a lattice of scars striping her from neck to rump. I faced her again and squatted down. She was still staring at my name. "And that happened before you came here?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"How long have you lived here?"

"A long time."

"The man who brings your food is my uncle," I said.

"I know. He said if I am good to you he will be good to me."

"Oh. He's a…hurtful man."

"He's not," she said, "he's a good man. He helps me, feeds me, gives me shelter. But now — " her buoyancy sank " — now he says I am filled with blood and it pours out of me like piss. I've told him it doesn't give me pain but still he is angry. As punishment he has burnt all my clothes; it has made me a slut, he says, and sluts have no need for clothes. When he goes inside now he does it the way sluts do…the way they deserve." She whimpered; her nose twitched. "Today," she went on, "after you upset him, he spoke of carrying me to the river in a sack weighted down with stones and lead piping…"

"He shouldn't threaten you like that," I said, "and he shouldn't do…those things."

"What things?"

"Sex."

"What's that?"

"Inside you…?"

"Oh, you mean fucking."

"Yes. He shouldn't — "

"Why?"

"It's not nice…"

"It doesn't hurt," she said, "apart from when my pussy goes as tight as a virgin's asshole, then he can't help himself." She angled her neck and proved it by displaying a set of teeth marks.

"You shouldn't talk that way," I said.

"What way?"

"Using words like those."

"Why?"

"Decent people don't, only my uncle. And," I said, pointing at the imprint on her neck, "people shouldn't do things like *that*."

"You mean humans shouldn't."

"*You're* human," I replied.

"Only down one side."

"Which?" I asked, having visions of pot-bellied men supping beer and whooping while fur and skin met forcibly by their feet.

"The inside. That's what my mother always said."

I pondered over her obscure defence of my uncle. Perhaps she was correct in her judgement. Perhaps when my shoulders fattened and my face rubbed rough I too would speak and act that way. But even if what he did by torchlight *was* natural it didn't undo his threats of murder.

If he didn't choose a river there were hundreds of lakes in the region whose shoals wouldn't complain about one more pair of lungs.

"You can't stay here," I told her. "It's too dangerous."

"But where can I go?"

"Come to my house. We'll think of something there."

"What about your uncle's anger?"

"My uncle's anger…?"

"Who will he fuck? He likes fucking. If he doesn't fuck at least five times a week he's as stir-crazy as a motherfucking con."

"Erm…I'm sure he'll find someone," I said.

"Who?" she asked, obviously concerned.

"There are women he can go to…"

"Like me?" she said brightly.

"Yes," I said with a smile, "like you."

Covering a pile of dung in the motorhome was a blanket, which I arranged around her to cover her nakedness. With luck, the streets would be deserted by the time we reached town and we'd be able to slip into my block unnoticed. I swept my name from the ground, undid her collar, then guided us both silently through the yard and onto the highway.

"Once I leave here," she said as our toes touched concrete, "I can never return."

"I realise that."

"So you must promise to help me."

"I promise," I said, "as long as you promise to stop using certain words. I'll teach you new ones."

"I promise."

"Good," I said. "And don't worry," I added, putting my arm round her neck and avoiding the headlights of oncoming cars, "everything mends."

"I know," she replied. "I've heard."



OUR APARTMENT WAS ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF THE city, away from the triple-X cinemas and porno boutiques, away from the neon, the vagrants, the shouters, the quiet ones with Christ on their minds…

Some nights the hookers would ride out to our district and expose themselves to kerb-crawling sedans; if you got up early enough you could still see the occasional one lingering at dawn, buying cigarettes from the beggars and trying not to fall asleep standing up.

The few pedestrians we passed didn't comment on Jacqueline's appearance; they stared the other way and improvised conversation, gripping their wallets through their Macs.

She didn't speak as we replaced weeds and fields with the angularity of buildings, the hiss of nothing-noise with the background drone of traffic on tarmac and disco beats. She coughed, and I averted my gaze while she gathered surplus substance from within her tubes and disposed of it onto the pavement. At first I thought this was another of my uncle's habits that she'd picked up, but later, when she started rubbing her skin and her eyes, I realised she was having trouble with the air.

Inside, I left her in the garbage recess whilst I went upstairs to see my father. She settled into an alcove between a pair of overstuffed bins, not requiring an explanation but accepting it unequivocally.

Because his legs seemed to want nothing more to do with the supporting of his torso, my father spent most of his days in bed. He watched television and read the papers and ate the food I delivered him daily. If angered, he had a knack of being able to launch himself off the mattress and skittering across the floor to wherever I was; had it not been so scary it would have been hilarious, like *Wilde Coyote* concertinaed by a boulder and waddling aimlessly in circles. His hands were massive, and when he was pissed at me he'd describe how he could quite easily stop the breath in my mouth. I didn't doubt him, and on those occasions slept in one of the derelict flats that proliferated our building.

He hadn't always been aggressive. When my mother was alive he was a different father: he used to laugh and joke, and not once did he lean from the window and swear at God.

He was propped up in bed smoking a cigarette and ticking horses on a racetrack programme. As always, the room reeked of wet wallpaper and sweat. I left the door ajar, and stayed near it.

"You go?" he asked without glancing up.

I said I had, and that he wanted two bottles in future. He cursed absently.

"Do you know anything about the girl who lives with him?" I asked.

"You mean that freak he calls the Jackal?"

I was astonished he was aware of her existence. I'd assumed it to be a well-guarded secret.

"I saw her today, and I think we should do something because the way he treats — "

Dropping his pencil, he looked up, grabbed his walking stick and shook it in my direction. He was so irritated he couldn't get his words out at first. "Listen…she's an animal, and as it says in the bible we have dominion over the birds of the sky and the creatures of the earth. What he does with her is his business. Stay away!"

He edged onto the lip of the bed, preparing to hop to the floor and come at me. I paced backwards.

"It's wrong," I said.

"Do you want to live on the street?"

"It's — "

"*Do you want to live on the street?*"

I shook my head.

"Do you want to sift through rubbish for your dinner? Do you want to squabble over the smallest amount of change with all the others out there?"

Again, I shook my head.

"Well stay on the right side of Uncle Joe. We won't find anywhere cheaper."

"What? He owns our apartment…?"

"Why else would we keep him in drink?"

I hadn't realised the position of our landlord. Suddenly the situation engulfed me with its magnitude. It hadn't mattered before if my faithfulness in Jacqueline's liberation had been true or half-hearted; but now I was personally involved with what, the more I thought about it, seemed to be the most valued item in my uncle's possession.

"You haven't done anything to upset him, have you?"

"No," I said. "But who is she?"

He eyed me suspiciously. Had he been more in touch with his son he'd have read deceit in my face, in the insecurity of my voice; but our blood parted years ago.

"I don't honestly know where it came from," he explained. "To begin with he reckoned he'd found it on a hunting trip up in the mountains. But one day years later, when he'd been drinking, he told me he'd bought it at an auction in Texas and brought it here under the tarpaulin of his truck. It was no more than a kid when he first got it, three, maybe four. He cared for it then, even taught it to speak and learn words from books. But once it had more or less grown up he lost interest, that's Joe for you; moved it out of the house and started charging his friends to...see it."

I was about to ask if he considered his brother's actions to be improper but cancelled my question at the last second. I had a fairly accurate idea of where his allegiance would lie.

The phone started to ring. Before he'd had chance to pick it up I fled back downstairs, collected Jacqueline from the garbage, and headed out into the street.



THE SHIVERS THAT HAD PLAGUED JACQUELINE since leaving my uncle's farm increased in severity as the night wore on. Though it was warm she trembled gently and consistently under her blanket, and as we walked into the hub of the city she sobbed for the incertitude I'd brought.

I attempted to explain about my father's lack of aid, and that the only option left open was to put our trust in strangers. She clung to my arm, her teeth chattering, and I interpreted her silence as consent.

She said her blood seemed to be coming out faster here than in the countryside, and in greater volume. She asked me if the cut between her legs was fatal, and if, when we got to where we were going, they sewed it up, how would she be able to pee? I tried to explain, but my uncle had planted more concepts in her impressionable psyche than I could ever have hoped to uproot. In the end I told her that it would stop of its own accord and so all she could was wait.

"The animal hospital," she said as we crossed the river, "how far is it?"

"It'll take about an hour. But it isn't a veterinary clinic, it's a hospital for people."

"That's no good, is it?"

"But you are a...never mind." I couldn't argue with so many earnest years of persuasion. Besides, there was a possibility that she was correct, that she *had* been born in a forest, her cord bitten through by her mother and her coat lapped lovingly clean.

"They'll be able to help us," I promised.

"And if they can't?"

I had no response with which to reassure her, and having none felt I knew how my father did on the day my mother quit fighting.



THE HOSPITAL WAS A MAJESTICALLY CARVED building that was staggering to observe and daunting for children to enter. It had been constructed with pioneers in mind, with medicinal miracles; not the overdoses, self-strangulations and other unsuccessful suicides that accounted for eighty percent of its throughput. It was a focal point for both the city and for me: it was the place where those tired of life went to be bandaged and healed and dispatched, fit for next time; it was also where my mother had died.

We paused before the automatic doors. I took Jacqueline's hands from within the folds of the blanket and held them in mine. Though she had mud crammed beneath her nails I still found it impossible to picture her ripping and nibbling through road kill in honour of her namesake.

"I don't know what they'll say in here..." I admitted.

"Will they want money?"

"Yes..."

The truth was I wasn't sure what they would do beyond inspecting and cleaning her grazes, and tending to her womanhood. Maybe nothing needed to be done. Maybe there were girls like Jacqueline locked in cages and cellars all across America, like cats and dogs and parakeets, ownership allowed.

"They'll probably ask you your name," I said, "and where you come from."

"If I tell them will they take me back?"

"Yes, so don't mention my uncle, say you're homeless."

"Will they still help?"

"They should. But can't you remember anything about your life before you met him?"

"Kind of. Sometimes if I close my eyes I can picture my mother. She sits on a foldaway chair inside a wagon. I'm kneeling by her feet with my head on her lap and her fingers are tangled in my hair. She's singing softly, so softly I can barely hear it. Then the door slams open and the fresh smell of night rushes in. My father appears and he and my mother argue. He says that the bits missing from his hands and feet no longer pull crowds, and that the troupe will disband by winter. I feel my mother's arms tighten around me. He grabs a dish from the table and exhibits its emptiness; he holds the back of her head and thrusts her face into it until she struggles. He drags me outside. The last time I see my mother she's lying on the ground, clutching

his ankles and crying. People come running. Some have strange shapes and some are joined together; one manoeuvres himself on his hands and feet like a crab. There was an old man who used to read me the stories that were painted all over his skin. He had fists like cartoons. He banged them on the trunk as my father drove us away…"

I helped her wipe her eyes with a corner of the blanket.

"Let's go in," she said.

The whiteness consumed us, and as it did she reached across and kissed me on the cheek. I guided us towards reception, where we were issued with a number and ordered to wait with the injured, the crazed and the just plain lonesome.



NOT A SOLITARY WORD FORMED ITSELF ON JACqueline's lips while we were inside those sterilised walls, and when at last we huddled into a cubicle with a disgruntled medic she answered his questions through me.

I provided them with my name and address, and told them she was my cousin who was living rough near my home. The nurse on the desk didn't seem interested at first; we had no money and I couldn't give them my father's telephone number. After making numerous attempts to locate a database record for Jacqueline she shrugged and told us to wait.

The doctor was indifferent, and half asleep. His eyes were rimmed red, his coat wasn't buttoned and he'd forgotten to zip up his fly. He treated the minor abrasions she'd sustained from thistles and thorns, and donated her a packet of MaxiPads, which, with the aid of a diagram drawn on the side of the box, he explained how to use. Then he ushered us back to the front foyer and got me to sign a form.

"You can't just let her go," I said, "she's ill."

"What's the matter with her?"

"She's been sleeping in alleyways, not eating…" There were things wrong with her; not like sores and grazes or aches or pains, but *things*…

"Ask at the desk and they'll give you the address of a shelter, but I don't think you'll get a bed this late."

He started to shamble away.

I thought quickly, and shouted, "She has no clothes."

He stopped, turned, chewed his lip a second and came back. He looked at the blanket she was wrapped in, at her bare feet. "Maybe I can let you have some clothes," he said.

He must have discovered an untapped source of energy for we had to trot to match his pace as he led us through numerous winding corridors, past wheelchairs and stretchers and what seemed like hundreds and hundreds of buckets. He stopped in front of a door marked private. He opened it and a series of lights flickered noisily on. We went in.

"You might find something in those," he said, flicking his thumb at a mound of clothes. "I'll be outside. Don't take too long."

Unlike all the others this room hadn't been disinfected. It had no furnishings, and a bare concrete floor. From the opposite side of the end wall, and coming through into the room we were in, was the sound of a furnace. I had a notion that as we'd progressed through the corridors we'd also gradually borne downwards.

Jacqueline sorted through the skirts, blouses and jeans — lots of jeans, nearly every second item she picked up was a pair of jeans. She discarded the underwear and the leather jackets, and when a syringe fell out of one I realised what function these quarters fulfilled. This was where they incinerated the clothes of the deceased, where they brought the unidentified corpses — the folk with no one to claim their belongings — and got them ready for bed. These were the rags worn by those who slept in boxes in subways, flung in here as a temporary measure by whoever's job it was to undress the dead.

"Try to find something clean," I said.

Settling for a purple dress and Paisley blouse, she discarded her blanket, put on her new clothes, and pirouetted. The blouse was too large, and the dress ripped around the pockets. Nevertheless, I told her she looked beautiful; she had about her manner something of an adolescent pomposity — like that accompanying a first shave or the getting of a first brassiere — and I didn't want to spoil her moment. Anyway, she was on the first rung into society now; from animal to poor white trash.

"Don't you want a pair of shoes?" I asked.

"No, but I will have this." She stooped and disentangled a pocketbook from a separate pile of watches, jewellery and belts.

Now she was dressed I could appreciate what it was that ailed her. Before, with only dirt and whiskers between her and the world, she'd looked natural; but wearing cheap clothes, and with that pocketbook slung over her arm, she looked duped of her beauty. And I realised it was this that had been disturbing me all day: her deception. She'd been duped of her mother, duped of her heritage, duped of her anatomy, her childhood and her future; and all that remained was the flesh on her bones, the marrow within and the blood without, and my uncle had plotted to even cheat her of those.

We went up to the foyer and back out into the night.

I wasn't impressed with that place. The last time I'd been there they'd had no cure for cancer. This time they'd had none for deception.



"WHERE ARE THE STARS?" SHE ASKED AS WE trudged towards the city limits.

"They're up there somewhere," I said.
"So why can't I see them?"
"Cloud and smog," I replied, "mainly smog."
"What's smog?"
"It comes out of factories and goes into the sky."
"Why?"
"Because it has to."
"Why does it?"
"There's nowhere else for it to go."
"Oh," she said, then seconds later, "I don't like smog."
"No one does."
"So why make it?"
"It's...complicated."

We continued over the city boundaries without further interrogation, and finally reached the zoo at daybreak. We went through the main gate.

I looked around. I hadn't visited the park for months and the atmosphere had changed considerably; the air was drier, almost powdery. The reptile houses, trees and pools that surrounded us hadn't screamed or chirruped or pecked at their bars in years. The tyres didn't swing on their ropes; the netting didn't wobble under the ire of its captives; the pools didn't splash suddenly and transiently after hours of calmness...

Some remains had been stolen, but those escaping the attention of looters were into their final — and most eloquent — stage of decomposition. Their flesh, whether it had been shiny or furred, spotted or striped or plain as the sky, had almost completed its course back into the earth, with only a handful of fly-infested puddles remaining. However, it wasn't ephemerality that still attracted the occasional ghoul or storyless journalist through the rusted turnstiles and into wonderland, it was endurance. What could rot quickly, had; but the skeletons, lying or floating where they'd collapsed from starvation, refused to be diminished mouthful by mouthful, electing instead to have themselves whittled away by the wind a slither at a time. And, freed from the confines of both bars and skin, they were at their most beautiful.

"What is this place?" Jacqueline asked, trying to read a sprayed over sign.

"It was a zoo. We came here when I was young. My mother laughed at the monkeys and got into trouble from my father for throwing them food."

"I don't understand."

I explained what a zoo was, and she asked me why people would want to come and look at animals. I said I didn't know; to just *look*, presumably.

We walked on. At the reptile house she asked me to read the inscription beside a drawing of a snake.

"Where are the pythons now?" she demanded when I'd finished.

"Dead, like everything. The zoo's been closed for years. They left the animals to starve and feed off each other. A group of people chained themselves to City Hall about it but the police hosed them away. They should've just let them go."

"The animals or the people?"

"Both."

"I'm tired," she said.

"We'll be left alone over there." I pointed to a pit from which all the water had long since evaporated. We clambered over the railings, slid down the slope and went into a concrete igloo. Jacqueline took off her clothes and something told me that the fad had passed and she would not put them back on. In case any sightseers happened by we laid down right at the back, against the wall.

"Do you like it here?" I whispered.

"It's dark, and cool. I like it."

"Maybe we could stay for a while. Until we find somewhere better."

"Okay."

The world turned towards day but we were still; and soon asleep and dreaming of the place we would shortly go. And in the dream I was certain that when we arrived Jacqueline would know its glades and its wildlife and its rain-spattered leaves, perhaps at some instinctual level she'd hitherto not credited. And I knew that gradually she would remember how to survive, and that I wouldn't, that I'd be lost in the daytime and terrified at night.

But I also knew I would like it, and that I would be quick to learn, quick to call it home.



JASON GOULD was born in 1971, lives in Hull and works for the Council. His stories have been published in a great many magazines, with others forthcoming in anthologies like the *Time Out Book of New Writing*. His influences include James Ellroy, Iain Banks, Clive Barker, Martin Amis, Will Self, Dennis Cooper, Kim Newman and far too many more to list here.

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SLIPSTREAM CINEMA

JEAN COCTEAU: FRONTIER INCIDENTS



by TIM LEES

Even if you've never seen a Cocteau film or read his books, you've more than likely caught their echoes: in Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*, Coppola's *Bram Stoker's Dracula*; in the 'terrible children' of McEwan's *The Cement Garden*, or the mirror-doors and beastly lovers that fill Angela Carter's books; or in the works of Russell Hoban, William Burroughs and Neil Gaiman. Without Cocteau (among a small handful of pioneers) there might have been no Peter Greenaway, no David Lynch.

In all, Cocteau himself produced some fifty volumes of plays, poems, novels, memoirs, diaries and criticism, plus drawings, murals, stage-sets, films, ballets, music, tapestries and sculptures. His name is still well-known, his work a treasure trove for modern artists seeking inspiration. And yet his own status remains in doubt. To many critics, he was just a showman, a poseur whose work lacks intellectual depth and coherence; even the normally generous Anthony Burgess dismissed him — unwisely, perhaps — as 'a minor poet'.

How can a man be so productive, so influential, and yet still not recognised? Well, in some ways, it was probably his own damned fault. But I'll return to that a little later.

Jean Cocteau (1889–1963) found fame early and easily, and liked it. As a teenager, his poems earned him an introduction to the Paris literary salons, and the big names of the period — Picasso, Gide, Breton, Stravinsky, were all close associates, if not always friends. It was Diaghilev, the Russian ballet impresario, who furnished him with the first maxim of his artistic life, 'Astonish me!' — later supplanted by Radiguet's much cooler, more astute advice that 'elegance lies in not astonishing'. Throughout his creative life, whatever field he worked in, Cocteau saw himself as a poet. The same symbols, the same significant events, images and characters, recur obsessively; and it's significant that, when he turned his attention to the cinema, perhaps the greatest mass medium of the century, what he produced was personal, almost solipsistic. For Cocteau, the abiding theme was the place of the poet in an often hostile world: public image, private self, artistic work all interwoven, no division between 'real' world and dream: 'I am the lie that always tells the truth'.

His first film sets the tone. *The Blood of a Poet* (*Le Sang d'un Poète*) was financed by the Vicomte de Noailles, who had also financed films by Dali and Buñuel. Cocteau was on the outs with the surrealists at this time and keen to distance himself from them; yet, at first glance, *Blood* looks like a fairly typical exercise in surrealistic imagery.

A young man, stripped to the waist, wearing a courtier's wig, stands before a newly-painted self-portrait. The portrait's mouth begins to move. The young man tries to wipe it off with his hand, but it embeds itself into his palm, forming a wound or stigma, where it pouts lasciviously and will not be dislodged. The poet presses it against his own mouth and writhes in ecstasy. Next day, a statue appears, a woman in ancient Greek robes. Attempting to rid himself of the hateful mouth, he wipes it on the statue, which comes to life and reproaches him: 'Do you think it's all that simple to get rid of a wound, to close the mouth of a wound?' The statue is his destiny, the poet's fame or fate; he tries to flee, only to find the doors and windows have all vanished overnight; the room is now a trap, which he escapes by leaping through the mirror.

On the far side, he finds himself in the dreary Hôtel des Folies Dramatiques. He moves slowly, as if underwater (just as Orpheus will do later, in the Zone), peering voyeuristically through keyholes at bizarre, symbolic scenes: a Mexican is shot twice, and rises twice; a girl is taught to fly, and sneers down at her earthbound mistress; shadow-forms smoke opium; a hermaphrodite lifts its dress to reveal a placard: '*Danger de Mort*'. The poet is crowned in blood and glory. Returning to his room, he smashes the statue, but is told, 'Breaking statues, one runs the risk of becoming a statue oneself'. And this is exactly what seems to take place.

The next scene is from childhood: the snowball fight from *Les Enfants Terrible*, in which the hero Paul confronts his boyhood love, Dargelos. Here, Dargelos' snowball strikes Paul, who falls, blood trickling from his mouth. At once, the scene transforms into a theatre filled with smartly-dressed spectators. Below, the poet and Destiny play cards. The poet tries to improve his hand with an ace of hearts taken from the dead boy at his feet, but a black angel appears, spiriting away both the card and the child. Deprived of both, the poet shoots himself. The woman, Destiny, or the Goddess of Poetry, becomes a statue once again, linked with a bull whose horns become a lyre — Zeus and Europa. The author remarks on 'the fatal boredom of immortality'. Throughout, there has been constant combat and reversal of rôles. Relationships have been victor/victim, parasite/host, an unending struggle both with the self and with a hostile outside world — the critics. A collapsing chimney,

first glimpsed at the film's opening, is at last allowed to disintegrate entirely — either a sign that the whole episode has taken place in a split second, or a piece of flagrant Freudian imagery, or, more likely, both. (Cocteau would later claim that Freud had described this film as 'like watching a man through a keyhole as he applies his make-up', but it's unlikely that Freud ever actually saw it.)

Such references aside, the film is not, despite appearances, strictly surrealist: it does not juxtapose random elements; it is not psychoanalytical. Rather, like all Cocteau's work, it is autobiographical, another attempt (in another medium) to express the dilemmas of the poet's life, from his early days in the Paris salons (symbolised by the courtier's wig) through his initiation into true poetry and beyond. Already, there are themes he would return to in his masterpiece, *Orphée*, and for the sake of argument, we might list them as follows:

1) **Poetry:** What is poetry? Where does it come from? Does the poet create poetry, or poetry create the poet? For Cocteau, poetry was the stepping stone to contact with a deeper world; his role was shamanistic. 'I state that...music, painting, sculpture, architecture, dance, verse, dramatics, and this muse which I term as Cinema, the Tenth Muse, are the snares with which man tries to capture poetry for our usage'. The poet is not his own man; he is often forced to do things which, as a private individual, he may not wish to (hence the young poet's attempt to rid himself of the mouth in his palm and escape his destiny). 'The poet's role is a humble one — he is at the orders of his night'. The 'angels' who haunt Cocteau's work are go-betweens, messengers from the world of poetry to that of man.

2) **Death:** The death of Cocteau's lover and protegée, Raymond Radiguet, had a profound effect on Cocteau. He began to smoke opium heavily, and became reclusive; it's a measure of his discipline that, despite failing health, there was little loss of creativity. His life fell into a pattern, with several months of heavy smoking followed by a 'cure' in a sanatorium, during which he'd feverishly transpose his 'visions'; it may well be that this phase transformed him from the frivolous salon poet to a serious artist. Setting, perhaps, a dubious precedent, Cocteau saw his addiction as a function of his angel: 'The work which exploits me needs opium'. At times he equated it with death; and see also the 'five deaths', below.

3) **Portrayal:** How to express the angel's messages? 'Find first. Search after'. There was a need for self-discipline and choice: 'A poet always has too many words in his vocabulary...' He harnessed familiar classical and medieval myths to serve his own purposes, as well as creating a personal repertoire of symbols and mythological figures, all of which gain status from their repetition in his works: mirrors, the angel Heurtebise, the schoolboy Dargelos, statues, horses, blood, motorbikes, and so on. Creation, in Cocteau's eyes, involved five deaths: 1) the death of the poet's 'opium consciousness'; 2) the death of traditional art forms; 3) the death of the poet as an individual during the actual creation; 4) the death of the purity of the original vision; 5) the death of the poet's presence with the finished work of art.



ORPHÉE: THE GRIM MOTORCYCLISTS

4) **Reception:** The poet's poetry must speak for itself, and stand apart from its creator. Thus Cocteau speaks of his 'visible' self (which is celebrated) and his 'invisible' self (the interior, private being which the greasepaint of the visible self protects). Though very much a serious artist, for whom the ability to communicate to his public probably meant more than any number of reviews, Cocteau was nonetheless enormously preoccupied with his own status — in Stanley Kaufman's words, 'the poet as self-conscious hero'. He would often see himself as unjustly persecuted, misunderstood; the self-portrait in *Orphée*, for example, shows him as a true poet, martyred to fashion.

Cocteau was not a cinema technician, proceeding by trial and error in this first film. (Knowing no technicians, he simply advertised for a crew, and took whoever turned up first.) *Blood* contained the usual share of Coctelian accidents, expediently incorporated into the design. On one occasion, the cleaners began to sweep the studio while Cocteau was still filming; he was about to protest when his cameraman pointed out the wonderful pictures he could take through the dust in the light of the arc lamps. Again, when Féral Benga, the jazz dancer who was to play the angel, sprained an ankle, he immediately became 'the crippled black angel' — inviting all sorts of fanciful symbolism. Constraints of time and budget forced Cocteau into some fairly strange creative acts, including the production of a false horn for the bull — the animal itself possessing only one...

Cocteau was enamoured of the cinema, 'that incomparable vehicle of poetry', perfect for capturing 'the frontier incidents between one world and another'. Yet it was years before he could express himself in films again, and never with the kind of freedom he had had in *Blood*. Meanwhile,

he wrote scenarios and dialogue for one director or another, learning the trade, delighted with the level of craftsmanship he found among cinema technicians. Directing his own films, he embraced at least the appearance of coherent narrative; and the first wholly Coctelian film after *Blood, Beauty and the Beast* (*La Belle et la Bête*), has proved his most enduringly popular work. Visually, it is stunning for the sets and costumes, and the composition of the shots, influenced by the work of Dutch painters such as Vermeer. A contrast is drawn between the day-to-day world of Beauty's family and the dreamlike world of the Beast's castle, where the borders between animate and inanimate, beast and man, begin to blur; yet it was one of Cocteau's maxims that 'the marvellous cannot be evoked through vagueness...mystery exists only in precise things'. The human arms emerging from the draperies with lighted candelabra, the smoke-breathing caryatids, Jean Marais' extraordinary beast-mask, made like a wig (and based on observations of the actor's dog) — these look real, almost theatrical. There is little use of specifically filmic techniques, although the slow motion sequence in which Beauty glides through the castle's hallways (propelled on an off-camera trolley), has an eerie, dreamlike quality. The script, meanwhile, relates the fairy tale world to our own: 'Many men are monstrous, but they disguise it'.

Behind scenes, it was the usual confusion, coping with illness, accident and the vicissitudes of life in postwar France. Cocteau himself was so disfigured by his eczema that he directed with a paper mask over his face. His journal of the period is a catalogue of love and disasters; love for the actors and the film crew he worked with, a pseudo-family of 'sacred monsters', hard-working, tolerant, and highly-skilled. In such company, he was, perhaps, at his happiest. He felt that he belonged; that the poet's solitude was, at least to some degree, alleviated.

Cocteau was 60 when he made his most important film, *Orphée*. His age is significant; although the film's hero — Marais, again — is young, Cocteau himself was suffering from a variety of personal and literary snubs, and clearly felt his glory days were well behind him. If *Blood* was a stylish, romanticised evocation of the creative process, *Orphée* reveals the consequences of truly living the poet's life.

'The poet must die several times in order to be reborn. Twenty years ago I developed this theme in *The Blood of a Poet*. But there I played it with one finger; in *Orphée* I have orchestrated it.'



ORPHÉE: ORPHÉE AND HEURTEBISE

Ostensibly a modern-dress version of the Orpheus legend, Cocteau's personal concerns are everywhere apparent. The film opens at the Café des Artistes, with a rivalry between poets: the older, celebrated Orpheus, and Cégeste, the darling of the young, whose book *Nudism* consists entirely of blank pages. There were off-screen significances in the casting here: Cégeste is played by Edouard Dermit, who had already begun to replace Marais in Cocteau's affections; while singer Juliette Greco played the leader of Orpheus's enemies, the young 'café existentialists', who, like the literary establishment, were apt to regard Cocteau as another 'yesterday's man'.

As in *Blood*, a female figure haunts the poet, her significance ambiguous (Cocteau's works are never merely allegorical). The Princess (actress Maria Casarès) is an aspect of Death, specifically Orpheus' death; but she may also stand for poetry, or opium. Severe and beautiful, totally ruthless, she captivates him, even while he knows that she'll destroy him. The image of her black Rolls Royce, flanked by two identical motorbike riders, is both terrifying and seductive, a rethink of traditional motifs in modern terms (and copied many times since then).

The Princess initiates Orpheus into the world of the Zone, entered through a mirror. This is the no-man's land between death and life, 'the memories of men and ruins of their habits'. Cocteau utilised a bombed military academy at St Cyr near Versailles; its eerily backlit walls, haunted by ghosts — a glazier wanders, aimlessly, crying his wares — is surely one of the most memorable sequences on film.

Back in the normal world, Orpheus becomes obsessed with messages he hears on the car radio, cryptic, lyrical phrases he imagines are his muse dictating to him; they turn out to be a prank played by Cégeste. 'That which we call inspiration comes from within us,' declared Cocteau, 'from the darkness of our own night, not from outside, from a different, so-called divine night. Everything starts to go wrong when Orpheus ignores his own messages and agrees to accept messages coming from outside.' The poet cannot follow fashion, even if it promises him fame. He cannot trust the world around; he must, in some sense, 'die' to it.

The plot is almost an 'eternal triangle', with Orpheus forced to choose between the Princess and his uninspiring Earthly wife, Eurydice. In fact, it's not much of a choice. Cocteau's misogyny came to the surface in this portrait of domestic life. Eurydice is pleasant, dull and bland. True

to the legend, Orpheus may no longer look at her; and yet the scene which follows, as they try resuming married life, is farce rather than tragedy, and Orpheus soon abandons her to seek out the Princess once again.

On the technical side, Cocteau was at his most ingenious in *Orphée*. The mirrors linking our world and the Zone were seldom what they seem. In one scene, there was no mirror at all, but two adjacent rooms, identically furnished. The motorcyclists simply walked through, and then Marais, following, faked a collision; sound was added later. Another 'mirror' was a 300-kilo tub of mercury into which Orpheus would sink his hand. Unlike water, mercury does not ripple, and conceals whatever penetrates the surface. But the mercury was impure, needing hours of polishing to clean it, and Marais had already gone home before the set was ready; Cocteau, a confirmed hand-fetishist, decided no one could stand in for him, and called him back.

The Zone conforms to Cocteau's dictum that the fantastic must look real; yet its laws aren't those of our world. After struggling step by step, as if against tremendous pressure, Orpheus and his companion Heurtebise are suddenly whisked up along a wall in startling fashion — the 'wall' had been built horizontally, filmed from above, the actors plunging down a slide (a trick Coppola obviously thought good enough to steal).

As usual, Cocteau enjoyed exploiting chance, deliberately 'misplacing' the music Auric had written for the film, so that the scherzo intended for the comic scene now accompanies Orpheus' feverish search for the Princess. Contrast of mood and elements had always been a favourite device.

Against everyone's predictions, *Orphée* was a commercial as well as a critical success, and won First Prize at the International Film Festival in Venice; which brings us back to the earlier question: why is Cocteau less celebrated than the best of his works might merit?

I can offer a few speculations. Firstly, as should be apparent now, his work is largely self-reflexive, varied in media but limited in theme. Despite his memoirs, his First World War novel *Thomas the Imposter*, or the gay 'novel' *The White Paper*, Cocteau is not a social commentator. His work is inward looking, and his constant concern with the poet's role may seem pretentious, or just plain irrelevant. And yet, when handled well — as in *Orphée* — it takes on much wider significance, like the hero-quest described in Joseph Campbell's *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*, with its pattern of departure, initiation and return: once more, the poet as shaman.



LE SANG D'UN POÈTE: ONE OF VISIONS IN THE HOTEL

Then there is his showmanship, his public, 'visible' self, concerned with art-world infighting and personal status. He may not be unique in this, and yet his tireless self-publicity has clouded much more serious aims. Worse, at times it overflows into his art, and his efforts to impress become transparent; the endless quips and epigrams, for instance, each delightful in itself, seem spurious and showy *en masse*, having impact but little depth; his work has been accused of being merely 'pretty'. Even his admission to the use of 'accidents' in his work — especially his films — seems almost like a conjuror revealing how he does the trick; there is, after all, no 'real' magic there.

And there are dangers for any artist working in a wide variety of media. He can't be good at *everything*, can he? Even when someone does gain recognition in different fields, the public usually gives precedence to only one. When did you last hear a Bowles sonata, or a Burgess symphony? Cocteau had the further disadvantage of being associated with, and compared with, some of the greatest of the century. He wrote at least one classic novel — *Les Enfants Terrible* — but, taking his novelistic output as a whole, he is not Gide, or Collette; his paintings and drawings are attractive, but he's no Picasso. Perhaps in cinema, where he had neither peers nor rivals, his poetry reached its most powerful and most communicative form.

'I begin to live intensely only when asleep and dreaming. My dreams are detailed and terribly realistic.'

His dreams are still available on screen. Watch for them. ■

FILMOGRAPHY

1932 **Le Sang d'un Poète**
1943 **Le Baron Fantôme**
dialogue only
1944 **L'Eternel Retour**
scenario and dialogue only
1945 **La Belle et la Bête**
1947 **Ruy Blas**
script, dialogue and adaptation of the original play by Victor Hugo
1948 **Les Parents Terrible**
1948 **L'Aigle à Deux Têtes**
1950 **Orphée**
1950 **Les Enfants Terrible**
scenario and dialogue
1960 **Le Testament d'Orphée**

next issue: Nicolas Roeg

God in a Basement Flat

Rhys Hughes





I WAS SITTING IN MY PAGODA, COMMITTING HARA-kiri, when the Celestial Horn began to sound. I had just finished a last cup of green tea. The single note, almost below the range of hearing, gradually expanded until it became unbearable. The Horn itself, black crystal studded with tiny stars, shuddered and threatened to topple off its pedestal. I opened my mouth and tried to mimic the ineffable purity of the effusion. Ears and spartan room filled with agonising sweetness. I raised the teapot to my lips and returned the beverage to its source.

I replaced the sword in its scabbard, uncrossed my legs and stood up. I was being summoned. God himself wanted to see me; there was no time to lose. I stuffed a cushion into the end of the Horn, crossed the room and slid open the silk screen doors. My bicycle was waiting for me outside. I mounted it and wobbled down the wooden causeway that linked pagoda to terra-firma. The fumes of the marsh rolled forwards, forcing me to press a scented handkerchief to my nose.

My destination was the coast. At the end of the causeway, I joined the road that would take me there, past chalets, bowling-greens, salted pavilions, lighthouses, to the Hotel Descartes. God had deserted his sumptuous palace for the benefits of sea-air. As I changed into top gear and accelerated, chasing satori, I caught the disturbing scents of the first rotting funfair: donkeys and doughnuts, hot-dogs and seaweed. I consoled myself with a hasty haiku:

"Goldfish choke in bags
Punch is drunk with Judy's whine
Fun is never fair."

A sudden crash behind me made me risk looking over my shoulder. My cushion was soaring high above the marsh; a gaping hole showed in the roof of my pagoda. God was growing impatient. I sighed and increased my pace, ringing my bell at the nesting flamingoes. As I neared the pale sea, discarded chip-wrappers and toffee-apples bounced across my path like tumbleweed. Grains of sand coated my cheeks. Calliope music, awash with spiralling arpeggios and jolly funeral chords, pursued remnants of music-hall songs over the barren landscape.

I reached the Hotel Descartes within the hour. The receptionist, a haggard old crone, led me up two flights of stairs to God's room. He was the only resident in the entire building. Other guests had long since been relocated to Nursing Homes. I was astonished by the squalor of the hotel: the peeling paintwork, the chipped varnish on the rickety wooden bannisters, the worn carpets. The receptionist wheezed as she rapped on the door of number 49. An ominous voice cried, "Enter," and I turned the handle and stepped through into darkness.

The blinds were drawn, the lamps extinguished. Such measures are necessary. No human, however pure, can behold the face of God without going insane. I groped my way around the room, stumbling into furniture, knocking over ornaments. Now the Creator's voice was muffled rather than portentous. As an extra precaution, he had locked himself into the en-suite bathroom. I was grateful.

"Listen Yukio," he said, "I've been doing a lot of thinking lately. Frankly, I'm worried. Heaven isn't the place it used to be. Paradise is starting to resemble Bognor Regis. There are too many old people getting in. They're cluttering up the place with their walking frames and bingo halls. We are being taken over."

I was duly humble. Even though I could see nothing, I kept my eyes on the floor. I remarked that I had been aware of the problem for some time. It was due to a rising life-expectancy. Dying young had gone out of fashion. God was nostalgic. "Exactly. In olden days, Heaven was a lovely place. Hardly anyone over the age of twenty. Fine boys and girls with soft limbs and olive tanned flesh, cavorting in the perfumed gardens. Something has got to be done."

"You want me to go to Earth?" I was excited by the idea. I relished the chance to see my planet again. "You want me to solve the problem for you?" Already schemes were moving in formal patterns across the glassy stage of my mind: a psychodramatic kabuki, obdurate figures. Yet I am not as blindly loyal as I once was. I asked: "An intellectual challenge alone or will I receive something in return?"

"You are perceptive, Yukio. I like that." There was a long pause. I began to grow afraid. I heard the toilet flush. Eventually, God resumed his speech. "If you achieve what I ask, I will permit you to commit a successful hara-kiri. A favour for a favour. But you are not the first I have commissioned for this task. I trust you will not follow the example of your predecessors. They have already been punished. Hot viruses and global warming were great disappointments."

"Perhaps the old techniques are no longer viable," I mused. "Plague and flood are out of date. We require something relevant to the modern age." I waited for God's answer. It did not come. "Worry not. I exist to serve." There was still no reply. I assumed the interview was at an end. I descended the stairs to the lobby. The receptionist clucked her tongue as I departed. I left her with an atheistic insight:

"No more cogito
Cartesian wells run dry
My doubts are a drought."

Before returning to my pagoda, I wheeled my bicycle to the frosty beach and attempted to kill myself on the sand. The blade slid in deep, but no blood leaked. I sighed. Broken deckchairs glided in the breeze, lodging together in pairs and resembling sinking trading vessels. The junks of faith. One day I shall read my own intestines and also learn, in their loops, the limits of hope and charity.



I DISCUSSED MY MISSION WITH MEREDITH MONK, my neighbour. Once a famous composer, she had sought to pursue her calling beyond the Pearly Gates. She was disappointed. Electricity is unknown above a certain latitude of divinity. There was no power for her synthesisers. She refused to seek solace in despair. Mechanical contraptions of harps and horns, stolen from unwary angels, suited her purpose. The larger models are amusing and pertinent. One day, you will know.

She lives on the other side of my marsh. This is a prime site; a relatively healthy stretch of fenland, troubled by less mosquitoes (I sleep naked to divert the insects away from her) and facing a static setting-sun. She always praises my novels, though I no longer dabble with prose. My features, she claims, are not those of a fanatic. To counter this insult, not because she expects it, but because an actor needs practise, I strut with unsheathed blade, crack each blasphemous twilight with banzai salutes.

"There is an answer to your dilemma," she said, adjusting position on her wicker chair and toying with her wineglass. In deference to her considerable wisdom, I had forsaken mat and bowl. I drank Chianti as did she; I dangled my legs. When we stood together, shoulder to shoulder, I appeared clumsy, fierce but impotent.

Meredith is an exception to everything. With women I normally deem it impolite to conduct literal conversation. I prefer to approach topics crab-like, carapace concealing pink flavour. As she refilled my glass, I should have swirled the vintage and remarked that my ancestors had ended our isolation for the sake of such flavours.

Instead I urged: "Tell me!" She laughed at this, an extraordinary sound. Her voice is a koto strung with lutist's hair. It tears at my heart, massages my spleen. (Not that the latter has been returned. I must wait. In few areas can Heaven be termed efficient. It is a stale bureaucracy with the trimmings).

She teased: "This is the eve of an adventure." I caught her meaning at once. Her ideas are like her music; they do not flow in a line, but pulse like frogs in a puddle. On an impulse, I reached out to touch her brow; my uncut nails snagged a ringlet.

She howled. The way of the haiku, the Kado, is in my very essence. In lieu of an apology, I muttered:

"A chord of her hair
By my clumsy fingers played
Sounds a single note."

Against the sunset, antithesis of all my ideals, flamingoes veered silent and indistinct, like splinters of the sinking star. Why had God erected such a ludicrous vista? Because the sunset is a symbol of the artist? But nobody wanted the thing: I can only live in the light of the sunrise. I suspect a mordant joke. Can a frozen sun really be said to be setting rather than rising? I refuse to concede the point. They are not the same. Close your eyes and use your nose.

Meredith huddled in her shawl. A cool wind rose from the shallows; reeds tottered. Chimes hanging from the porch offered five notes of a coherent melody. She crooned to herself, stealing the music and adding words. I was reminded of a fairy-tale, the way her syllables soothed. I shrugged. "Then I must go to Eden…"

Not a notion to relish. Once the most sublime garden in the Cosmos, Eden had fallen into neglect. Picnickers are mostly responsible for the litter that has accumulated over millennia. But I personally blame DH Lawrence. He was a poor choice of gardener. The work is beyond him; he grumbles into his beard as he hoes and rakes. It was a long journey, a bumpy ride. Honour for Genji, my bicycle. The chance to burst a tyre in the divine service comes to few velocipedes.

Meredith indicated her desire to retire indoors. Her house is pure ranch, complete with wooden veranda and paraffin-lamps. But it rests on stilts above the waters. We stood, once more shoulder to shoulder, and I saw in her form a silky strength pulped from the flesh of a myriad young boys. As I waited for her to make the first move, she asked: "If Heaven is overcrowded, why do we meet so few people?"

"We are privileged guests," I told her, "living in one of the last wilderness areas. We must be appreciative."

In truth, her tone depressed me. My mission seemed little more than a token gesture. Shortly after I died and climbed the cumulus ladder, my knowledge of cosmology underwent a radical shift. I discovered there was not a single Earth but a multitude of them, each one slightly different, arranged in neat parallel dimensions for the apparent purpose of playing out the total sum of all possibilities.

Now I was going back to my own, to close the border, but there were innumerable others, on rival Earths. Shutting off the exit from just one would barely scar the surface of the problem.

Meredith was blaspheming. "Why does he live in a hotel? You don't really believe that sea-air nonsense?"

I suggested he craved simplicity. This did not satisfy her; she had studied too much in the hermetic tradition of philosophy. Though God was omnipotent, he could not do everything. For example, he could not impede his own progress or attenuate his own power. Such actions are born of impotency. God's doings sprang from strength, never from weakness. She learnt this from Anselm, the very lips. "It looks bad," she explained. "A deity in bed and breakfast accommodation!"

These ontological twists bruised my skull more than shochu (sake is a fairly weak drink) and I shook them free. I told her I had chosen to serve God whatever the metaphysical basis of his decisions. Even if he was turning senile, I would continue to obey. A mad Creator is no less useful to me than a sane one. Defeat can be noble as victory. I believe this still, I am merely more cautious.



For a minute, we mocked the sunset. Meredith, who sometimes thinks in quotes to please me, said: "All the world's a stage, and here is the safety-curtain." The sky was a wall of flaming cloud. The truth of the marsh, cancerous with small islands, was anonymity. Wavelets lapped like prams. A beacon on the far shore winked its attentions. Flattered and offended by the familiarity, she pursed lips. She turned toward me and my smirking bicycle. Mechanisms are her suitors, gear-ratios court her favours, seeking to impress and penetrate.

As I watched the beacon, the absurd thought branded itself into my consciousness. There was no lighthouse on that stretch of marsh. It was my pagoda, burning in fits and starts. Someone was detonating barrels of gunpowder in the vicinity! Tempered by centuries of damp, the pagoda was resisting to the very end. I stood and stumbled on the rim of the porch, nearly falling into the marsh. I cannot slit veins here, but I can silt them up. Would this suffice as a substitute demise?

"Arsonists?" Meredith was incredulous.

Tying my headband to Genji's handlebars, I took leave of my friend with a slight bow. I skirted the ordure, oily as sweat, sword bouncing in basket. When I reached my home, there was nothing left but the glazed roof, floating on the marsh like a monstrous lotus. The wood and paper fluttered as ash, greasing the waters further. On the causeway, shards of my Celestial Horn formed a sparkling message: JUST A REMINDER, SIGNED GOD. I noticed two shadows in a punt, poling their way back to smugness: the Archangel Gabriel and a lackey. They wiped soot from their haloes. God's dirty work leaves indelible stains.



THE FOLLOWING WEEK, ON BORROWED WINGS, I soared through Earth's upper atmosphere, high over Asia. I alighted in the city of my childhood, the focus of my maturity. I had decided to combine business with pleasure. I wanted to remember the good times, the unheeded shouts, the feel of the edge in my abdomen, as startling as a girl's tongue. Nostalgia. My head jumped from my shoulders on the third attempt.

Tokyo had certainly changed since my day. I was born into the old city, unwilling beneficiary of Kanto earthquake and American fire. In the wake of these ravages, flimsy wooden structures had sprouted; these were gradually replaced by low-rise concrete blocks. An ugly town for much of my life, it has to be admitted. But now wealth had encouraged the erection of glass and steel edifices. In the districts of Harajuku and Roppongi, people moved with less grace and more confidence. Wallets distorted pockets, credit-cards were fumbled.

I spent a good two hours wandering around, seeking familiar haunts. I kept generally to the rooftops. At last, in Ichigaya, I chanced upon the site of my original death. The compounds of the Ground Self-Defence Force had been demolished. So I returned to the Ginza district, the hub, and stalked the edges of the moats ringing the Imperial Palace Grounds. Mandarin ducks and joggers flashed their plumage.

I sensed I was not alone here. Dark forms could be felt vibrating seductively on the other side of the metropolis. Probably agents of the Other, sowing the beansprouts of discontent. It was best not to concern myself with them. I had seen enough evil: the hammer and sickle painted on walls of student commonrooms, the withering of my culture. I awaited nightfall and made my way directly to a discreet hoteru, a love hotel, in the Gotanda section. Here my target, Dr Miyoshi, head of an eponymous corporation, lay snuggled with a hired hostess.

Filtering through the air-conditioning, I reassembled myself and dipped into the folds of my robe. Miyoshi was snoring loudly; the girl in the hollow of his armpit was quiet. Informants for God had already reported this weekly ritual to the Hotel Descartes on the Fax Vobiscum. God likes to keep a careful eye on his promising subjects. I had acted on the news with typical panache. I glanced around and winced at the decor. The room was furnished in standard hoteru style, with a mirrored ceiling, gaudy satins and other decadent luxuries.

From my robe I produced a purple ovoid. I had obtained it after a great deal of haggling with DH Lawrence. Despite the papers I carried, permitting me the use of any facility in Eden to aid my mission, he had remained truculent. Finally, after I agreed to read his complete works, he allowed me to pluck a single fruit. The tree I approached has always been the most jealously guarded, though it is not the most famous. There are no serpent-kissed apples in its branches; only Knowledge comes that way. The Tree of Eternal Life drops plums.

This was the contour of my plan. I squeezed the fruit between the compressed lips of the hostess, breaking the skin on her teeth. As she awoke, the sweet juice trickled into her throat. Her eyes widened; with a flick of my sword I clove her heart. Her breastbone sagged; the blade came out with a sound like that of a hinge.

Before she could bleed away this absurdity, I was gone. I left in the conventional manner. Departing a hoteru unobserved is simplicity itself. Customers and staff are supposed never to see each other. The bill is paid to a hand protruding from a curtain. As I strolled past, I cleared my throat and lisped: "Goshukuhaku." I am no humorist, but this is a very ironic joke. Take my word for it.

Outside, in the cool night, I attached my wings and lifted into the skyglow. Aside from a touch of clear air turbulence, my return journey was uneventful. I was eager to confide in my neighbour, to seek a quiet place to reap my reward. I found Meredith, as always, on the porch of her stilted ranch. She was experimenting with an embossed gong, as big as a shield, to which she had fixed various percussive adjuncts. When she struck it with a mallet, but gently as if massaging away its brassy stress, the sound was an acceptable cacophony.

She was pleased to see me. We exchanged bows, hers slightly deeper than mine, an unnecessary mark of affection. "How did it go?" she asked. I told her about the declining moral standards. I had witnessed men and women shaking hands instead of bowing, diners unable to grasp the true eating implements properly (and calling for a fork). We drank more wine, we nibbled at slices of kasutera. Genji, whom Meredith had kindly taken in like an orphan, came out to greet me.

I explained to her the exact nature of my actions. "When Miyoshi is awakened by the lashings of his harlot, his horror will soon be replaced by scientific curiosity. A woman without a heart who is still alive is a strange discovery. The plum will have lodged in her throat. Miyoshi will make the connection between the fruit and her sudden immortality. He is a man of true vision. The chemists of his Corporation will analyse the juice. An immortality drug will be on the market within a decade. Garage synthesists will ensure global availability."

Meredith was sombre. "No longer able to die, the citizens of your Earth will bar themselves from Heaven." I could not understand her lack of zeal. Or rather, I could understand it but refused acknowledgement. Success meant I would now be able to destroy myself. She would no longer enjoy my company. A rending weakness.

I said goodbye with informal swiftness, not even looking back as I led Genji over the causeway to a quiet marshy bank. My pagoda roof had drifted into the centre and started to sink. I watched it as I bared my chest, drew my sword and tasted its gleam. Genji shed a tear of oil. He wanted to follow my example. But who would be there to sever the spinal cord of his brake-cable? Consciousness is suffering. I had earned the right to break free. He had not.



I WAS LYING IN THE REEDS, PART OF NOTHINGNESS, when the Celestial Horn began to call. Splinters of the broken apparatus were being driven under my toenails. Somebody was kicking me, images of my childhood jumped into focus. "Hiraoka! Hiraoka Kimitake!" Who was using my real name? I could only open my eyes to see.

The Archangel Gabriel and a lackey, the same who had destroyed my pagoda, were crouching over me. It was raining. They were dressed in old suits and carried twisted umbrellas. A rough-looking Gypsy tandem rested on the causeway. Removing his top-hat, shiny with age, Gabriel dipped it into the fetid waters and emptied it over my face. A tadpole wriggled up my nostril. The lackey (who I finally recognised as Joan of Arc) thought this hilariously funny.

"Wake up! God wants to see you." Gabriel had a coarse Irish accent. When he replaced his hat, his halo struggled inside, warping its shape. He wore fingerless gloves: rubbing palms together, he produced enough static electricity to curl the ends of his dirty moustaches. Again, Joan of Arc burst into laughter. She was a simple child, the slackness of her facial muscles betrayed a mental degeneracy. "You're in trouble now, you rascal," Gabriel added.

With their unhelpful assistance, I staggered to my feet. I felt the wound in my side. It had disappeared. Genji was peering from some reeds, shaking with terror but too loyal to flee. I beckoned and, reluctantly, he approached. As I squinted at my surroundings, I saw that little had changed. Yet the decades pressed on my shoulders; I felt their weight like snapping turtles. "How long?"

"Not quite a century." Gabriel folded his umbrella and gestured at his tandem with the point. "I told God to leave you dead. But he said that's what you wanted. Follow us. Make sure you keep up. Purgatory was designed for the likes of you." He mounted his saddle, waited for Joan of Arc to follow his example and then pushed off. I watched them totter down the causeway, picking up speed and howling as the cold rain smashed their faces. There was no time to think.

I climbed on to Genji and pedalled after them, my little legs stiff from inactivity. They led me away from the marsh, onto the rutted road, past the funfairs, the sticky Guignol horrors. Unable to match the pace, I fell behind. A mist hung over the sea, broken boats flickered in and out of focus, drifting aimlessly. My jaw worked against the sight, teeth champing on the cold steam:

"Truth is cooked by time
Seconds cast the world to pan
Paradise to pot."

I was losing my ability. It was a punishment for my failure. A form of sympathetic magic. An ironic situation. Failure required the instant sacrifice, ritual suicide, yet here I had been resurrected to confront my shame. My surroundings mirrored my humiliation. Even the calliopes were weary, indistinct. By now, I had lost sight of my escort. Towards the Hotel Descartes I continued, turning over Meredith's words in my brain. In a curious way, I felt hungry for her scepticism. Am I doomed always to chose the role of victim?

The Hotel Descartes was in a dreadful state. Windows were boarded up and plaster was flaking off the outside walls. Gabriel and Joan were nowhere to be seen. The receptionist in the lobby glowered at me; one more century's worth of shrivel. I began climbing the stairs on my own, up to number 49. But she called out; the sound of a rotten cork falling into a bottle of sour wine. God no longer had a double-room. He lived in one of the cheaper singles round the back. We trudged gloomy corridors. The odour of damp cabbage greeted us like a friend who steals books. I grew faint, a flimsy echo of oblivion.

The receptionist left me in front of a door stained with graffiti, much of it carved into the wood in unholy hierograms. I had to use my own fist to knock. A hacking cough came in reply; I turned the handle and pushed into dimly-lit squalor. There was no en-suite bathroom in this residence. A cracked sink, bloated with string-vests and socks, stood next to a derisory washstand. God was concealed behind the grimy curtains, exposed feet in threadbare slippers.

"Ah, Yukio," he rasped. "My disappointment exceeds all limits. You promised you would do something, we made a deal. I kept my side of the bargain. Why did you let me down?" He cleared his throat with a horrible gurgling and proceeded to mumble some incomprehensible litany. Had I not known better, I would have deemed him drunk.

I bowed my head. "I did my best. I know not what else I could have done. The plan was a neat one." As God shuffled impatiently behind his curtain, I added: "I do not understand what went wrong. Did Miyoshi not play his part? Did the inhabitants of Earth reject immortality for other tricks? My dream has flaked all away."

God whined. It seemed he was racked by sobs, an impossible notion. "It didn't fail," he replied. "On the contrary, it worked all too well. On your planet, within a single generation, death was unknown. So the spiritual gate to Heaven was welded shut. The elderly no longer swarm; in this respect, I am pleased. But men and women who cannot die have no use for God. I have been forsaken."

"With all respect," I answered carefully. "That was not part of my mission. I was employed to tighten up border controls. If your support is dwindling on Earth, increase it with a miracle or two. Demonstrate the divine wrath. It should be easy for you to fill the churches again. Forget the precept of faith for a time."

The Holy slippers shifted, toes flexing in an untidy rhythm. Was God actually considering my advice, or were these the wriggles of some pantocratic anxiety? A sudden glare behind the faded fabric made me draw back; but this was no blinding halo. The flame snapped out and a curl of heavy tobacco smoke drifted towards the yellow ceiling. Coughing mucus, God grumbled and muttered to himself.

"My power is sustained by faith," he said. "As people fall behind with their worship, my living standards drop. Why do you think I've had to take this blasted room?"

My mind raced. "On one Earth, humans have achieved immortality and taken to atheism. Surely this is a drop in the cosmological ocean? What about the loyal trillions?"

God snorted. "Immortal yes, but not infertile. They keep producing children, doubters like themselves. That Earth grows ever more crowded with unbelievers. When it reaches saturation point, I'll be out on the streets. Homeless, I'll be, hungry."

"So you want me to do something about this as well? Return and find a way of sterilising the population?"

The curtain rippled. A burning cigarette fell onto one of the worn slippers, scorching a hole in the tartan. God shook it off with a spasm. "Forget about parallel dimensions and alternative Earths. I want you to concentrate on yours. The level of atheism has sapped my miracle-forming powers." He started coughing again.

"I'll try. I've got an idea already."

And the voice that punctuated the coughing was desperate: "I hope so, Yukio. For Heaven's sake!"



I USED TO BELIEVE THAT IMMORTALITY WAS A reflection in a prism of dew, suspended from a sword. I used to reason it as the pivot between pain and beauty. The act, the gesture, is ephemeral; but it folds down upon itself. The final poems before the blade penetrates the flesh, the useless charges across some Okinawa of the mind; these are wrapped in the present like parcels. I saw eternity as nothing other than a petal of transience, folded the correct way.

Meredith premiered her latest piece on her veranda, with myself as the total audience. Even Genji was excluded, his aesthetic sense deemed inadequate. An elaborate set-up of reeds and cooking utensils chilled me with its exotic homeliness. It was a celebratory work, to mark my second visit to Earth. Very few return visas had ever been granted; not even Spinoza managed to obtain one.

My neighbour had hardly altered her appearance during my period of nonexistence. Her long hair had been tied up in a messy bun, her nails were slightly longer. After she had sung herself hoarse, and dented an expensive set of iron woks, we enjoyed each other's company on a less formal basis. "I missed you," she said.

There was perhaps something accusatory in her manner. But I nodded politely and ignored her frustration. "I have destroyed death and must rid my world of birth also," I stated. We sat under her bedroom window, which was open; wisps of perfume drifted out. I had never asked to visit this sanctum, though from my chair I was able to study its interior: her own Celestial Horn was draped in lingerie.

Since her demise, Meredith had planned an elaborate opera set in the interstellar void. Now I sketched a hasty libretto: "Listen to my scheme. As living-space reaches a premium, there will be those seeking to relieve the pressure. Hopelessly impractical as they are, a fleet of vast starships could be constructed in orbit, to bear emigrants to alien pastures. A policy of lebensraum."

Meredith twirled a reed between her fingers. "Difficult to execute properly. And it skirts the issue. God requires you to stop production of children, not to populate other solar systems. Beware of immersing yourself too deeply in fantasy."

These were strong words indeed from my admirer. I shrugged with a flicker of impatience. "Allow me to continue. God knows the secret of cold fusion. If I can borrow the formula and whisper it in the ears of sleeping scientists and engineers, I can persuade them to develop huge reactors to power the starships. When ignited, the engines will flood Earth with radiation. Whole continents will be sterilised, populations will moulder, atheism will be thwarted!"

Meredith loosed her hair. I saw that her roots had turned grey. A theme I thought denied to dead poets had been returned to me: the utter loss of youth. "Tell me what you know of the universe," she sighed. For once, I knew she did not want lyrics.

I recited the creed. "There are a huge number of parallel Earths, floating in bubbles of reality, like pieces of food in saliva globules. Every possible working out of every situation occurs in total. On one, Mishima was an ape; on another, a housepainter; on a third, a stitcher of kites. On mine, he was a writer and suicide. There is one Heaven, large enough to accommodate the beings of all dimensions, though not comfortably. God rules the system like a chef who distrusts his whisk. We are his devoted servants."

Meredith inhaled deeply and gripped my arm. "Suppose this isn't true? What if the opposite is the case? A single Earth and a huge number of parallel Heavens! We think of sentient beings arranged in a pyramid, with God as the apex. What if, in some of these alternative Heavens, the bricks of that pyramid were rearranged?"

I struggled to interpret her metaphor. Pyramids do not slant large in the Samurai consciousness. I shifted uncomfortably on my seat. "God not as a capstone, glaring white?"

She made a wedge of her fingers. "In many of those other Heavens, God might be a lower brick. In a few, the pyramid might have toppled. Or even be inverted completely."

I was softly dumbfounded. "God as the weakest creature in the whole universe?" My laugh was unpleasant.

"Yes, but we wouldn't know about it. We die and assume we ascend to the one true Paradise. What if this is the Heaven where God is ineffably feeble? We defer to his reputation, we empower him with our ignorance. A desperate front maintained by his angels."

"It is atheism which erodes his power. He told me!"

"Perhaps he has nothing to erode. Maybe he just can't keep up with the deception any longer. He relies on our unwitting charity. We provide for all his needs. As we realise the truth, we stop working for him and reclaim what he owes us. Kicked out of a palace into a seedy hotel! What next? A basement flat with rats and damp?"

The notion was thoroughly tasteless to me, but not alarming. I saw a similar truth in my mortal time: the divinity of an emperor smeared in saccharine Yankee mud. I objected: "But how was I able to kill myself if God has no power? He really made it happen."

"What exactly did you get up to on Earth, apart from carrying out a mission? Did you visit any teahouses?"

I nodded. She was alluding to drugs: I had indeed sampled the green beverage in Ginza. Thinking about it, the taste had been rather odd; but I attributed this to falling standards. "Some sort of catatonia-inducing substance?" I whispered. I knew God's agents included geisha capable of slipping such poisons into drinks. Even if this were untrue, it would be simple to adulterate my regular supply. All imports from Earth passed through the hands of the Cherubim-Gestapo.

"Think about it before you descend," Meredith suggested. This was a hint for me to depart. I had erected a makeshift tent in the ruins of my pagoda. As I finished my wine and

stood, she touched my arm. I stiffened and burned with a medley of emotions.

"My ranch is large and lonely," she said. "Perhaps one day you will consider…" She flushed, frowned and turned away.

I wanted to hold her in my arms, nestle my head in her bosom, but I felt unable to move. My manners are too refined. She continued: "We are, after all, more than just friends." While she faltered, I bowed and made my way quickly to the security of my bicycle. Tomorrow, I vowed, I would confess my real feelings: an act of courage greater than suicide. Deeper than love for a country, for tradition.

Inside my tent, sword forming the central pole, stitched kimonos as silk canopy, I sat with Genji and reflected on my sins. If the hierarchy of Heaven really was reversed, I had been acting without absolute orders and thus without moral safeguards. My creation of an immortal human race was not right in the assured, deontological sense. I was responsible for the consequences. Furthermore with only one Earth instead of many, I had no chance to dilute my guilt. It confronted me like a mother: nor was I able to plead bullying by angels. In Meredith's revised cosmology, these were stronger than God but weaker than poets.

There were other fears. I had doubtless incurred the wrath of those Gods who existed in the alternative Heavens. Would they act against me? Was there no way to redeem myself? Might I enlist the aid of the devils? But Lucifer had once been God's right-hand entity, presumably the second weakest creature in the universe. Were men and women the real inheritors of this dimension? Or were there lesser beings higher up on the inverted pyramid? I craved Meredith's cool logic.

After a troubled sleep, I resolved to abandon my second assignment. But when I returned to the lodge, Meredith had vanished. I called out in vain while flamingos scattered from the sunset like traitors. I circled the house and tapped at the windows.

The rear door was ajar. I passed through into chaos. Garments were strewn on the floor, musical scores flapped underfoot. There was a loud rustling coming from the bedroom. Repressing an urge to knock, I pushed into the intimate space. Gabriel looked up in fright; I had caught him searching through Meredith's underwear. The force of my anger surprised us both. "You downy pervert! Where is she?"

He leered, a pair of stockings dangling from his grubby hand. "God has been listening to your little chats." He gestured at the Celestial Horn which stood on a dressing-table behind me. "These beauties operate both ways, mister. We heard the blasphemy. She's been sent downstairs, of course, where all opponents of the regime end up. All the way down to Hell!" Rubbing the silk over his bristly chin, he added: "Better get on with your mission if you don't want to join her!"

"I'm not going," I replied, refusing to bow.

An exasperated light came into his eyes. "Dissent, eh? You're in it now, my friend. Wait till God hears about this. Tip you over the edge of Heaven, he will, like that tart of yours. Brimstone for supper tonight. And a trident in the backside, no question."

I knew he was lying. I jumped forward and seized the Archangel in a headlock. His feeble resistance confirmed everything Meredith had said. Twisting his arm behind his wings and applying suitable pressure, I soon had the truth out of him. He shouted: "We had a word in her ear. Joan of Arc came round last night!" I knocked off his worn top-hat, revelling in my power. He gargled: "She accused you of unnatural habits. All sorts of vile business. Said you were a debauchee. Now let me go! I've got the damned teleological arthritis in my bones!"

I was aghast. "This is nonsense! Meredith wouldn't leave me because of gossip. What exactly did you tell her?"

Though in considerable pain, Gabriel managed a chuckle, greasy lips flecked with spittle. "She didn't seem to mind about the animals. It was the young boys she took exception to. Pity, she seemed such a liberal. I suppose she couldn't face you after that."

Stunned, I dropped the pathetic figure onto the bare floorboards. A hollow space had opened in my stomach, just above the hollow space where my guts had once squirmed. I stood over the Archangel and drew my sword. He whimpered and shut his eyes. Vermin, for whom my blade was a bailiff, were already abandoning their host, scuttling from his matted locks into the shadows. I would not let them use me as a new abode; I stamped those few who approached into elegant streaks, a calligraphy of crushed chitin and borrowed blood. Perhaps in this language I read a word of restraint. At any rate, I did not sunder the fool; my sword descended and his faded halo clattered in two pieces under the bed.

I left him sobbing and writhing in his own filth. There is no pride to be earned in destroying large insects. Departing Meredith's ranch and beckoning to Genji, I threw a leg over his crossbar and we trundled into destiny. There was only one way for God to salvage some honour. Kneeling at his feet, I would present my sword to him. I would ask him to do the decent thing: if he refused, I would assist.

When I reached the Hotel Descartes, I was alarmed to find it fallen almost entirely into ruins. Rubbish, old clothes and charred mattresses lay heaped against the walls. The roof had collapsed; the iron balconies sagged like intestines strung between poles. The entrance was locked. So I rang the bell until the mechanism broke; I pounded on the rotten door. As I turned to go, I noticed that one of the piles of linen was actually a hunched figure. A thrust with my blade soon had it moving — it was the receptionist, covered in bruises and blisters.

"I demand to know God's whereabouts," I cried.

She drooled and wheezed. I leaned forward to listen to her words. A little shaking made her mumblings more comprehensible. It seemed God had been evicted for non-payment of bills.

"He had a case of dynamite under his bed," she croaked, tapping her nose. "Left a burning cigarette on the pillow before stomping out. Don't know where he went. Good riddance, I say!"

Before I could pull away, she flung her arms around my neck and let loose a horrible shriek: "Took the towels before he left! Always said he was a thief. Strange stains in the bathroom!"

A useless gesture: I removed her outraged head.



A JOURNEY OF A THOUSAND MILES DOES NOT always begin with a single step. Ask Genji for details. His wheels are warped, his frame is twisted, but he is still faithful. On the hills I dismount and carry him on my back. I will never abandon him, though he pleads to be thrown into a roadside ditch. When he falls apart I will build a shrine from his pieces. After that I will walk all the way. I shall plant a tree for him in Eden. One of my few inspired ideas was to present my visa to DH Lawrence. I told him that Earth needed his talents. In fact, I simply want the Garden to reclaim some of its original beauty.

I travel Heaven, looking for God, looking for Meredith. Because she never deceived me, I search for him in the basement flats of the largely empty cities I encounter. Paradise is not overcrowded after all — it was a deception. The few people I meet also believed they were privileged. A new mood has gripped Heaven: with God's disappearance, people are forced to be free, to shoulder responsibility, to make choices. I am unprepared for such changes. My mentality is too rigid, I belong in a starched past which never really existed. I lust for death more than ever. My quest is the same as always: blood and blossoms.

In a dingy cellar in the last town I passed through, I chanced upon a group of my fellow countrymen. They were mostly ancestors, with a few later emperors and businessmen. After I forced an entry, they invited me to sit with them over a pot of green tea. Even here I was unconsoled: it took a great deal of restraint not to turn on Hirohito and blame all my troubles on him. By renouncing his divinity he subjected our culture to a fatal paradox. It set a precedent. A perfect being cannot claim mortal flaws. Once a god always a god. Aware of my hate, he said: "Students and deities always end up in basement flats."

There is still hope in my aching brain. I like to imagine there are creatures able to grant me my wish. In courtyards of deserted tenements, dying angels are pegged out on washing-lines; beyond the cities they are worked mercilessly in the fields. The revolution is spreading. If angels are stronger than God, and we are mightier than angels, who can we look up to? There must be something. When I find God I shall ask him a single question. From Mishima, the very lips. Down there, in his foul basement, before I cut him into three pieces, an unholy trinity, I will demand to know the address of his landlord.

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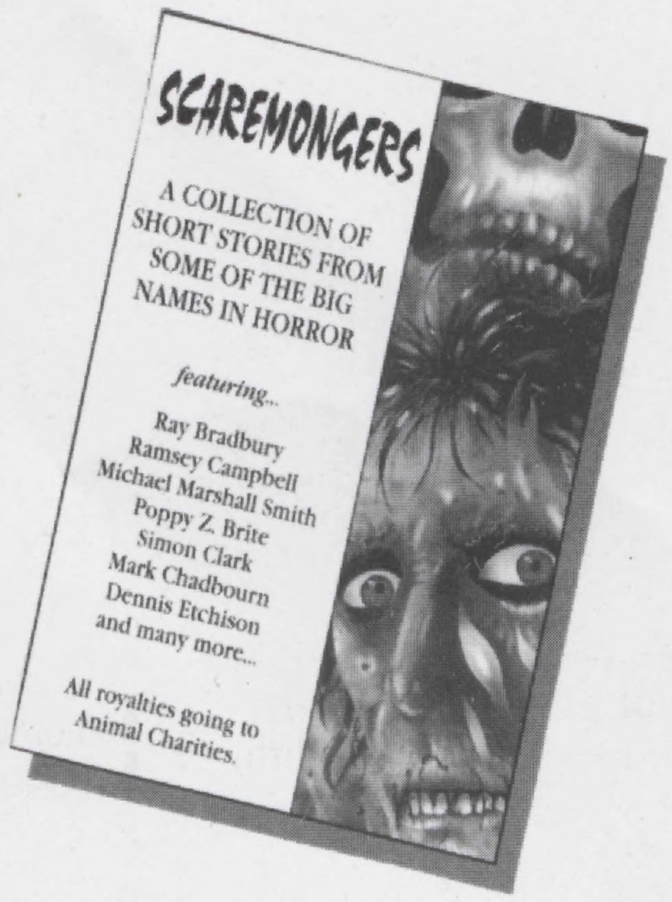
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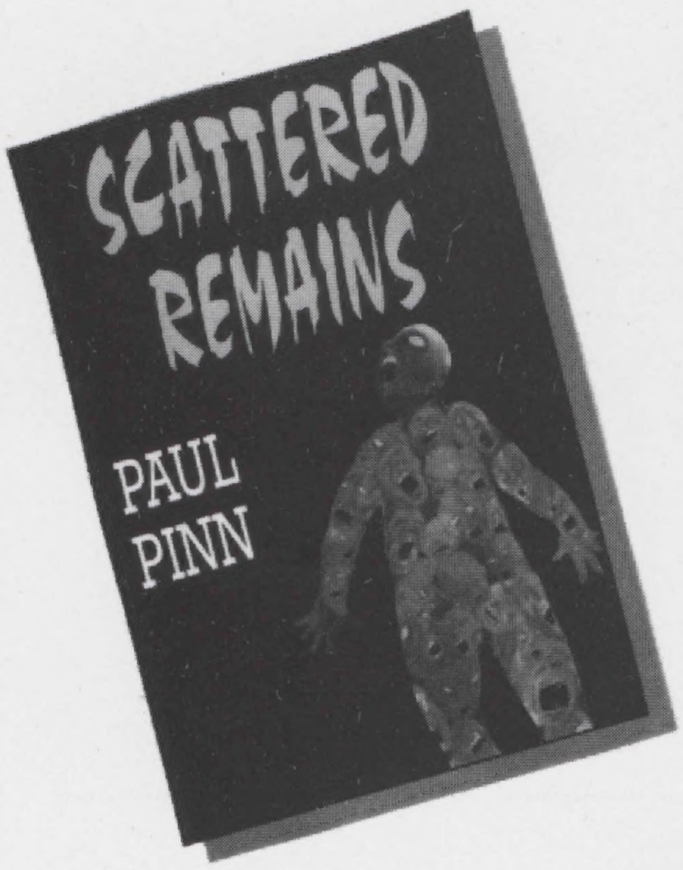
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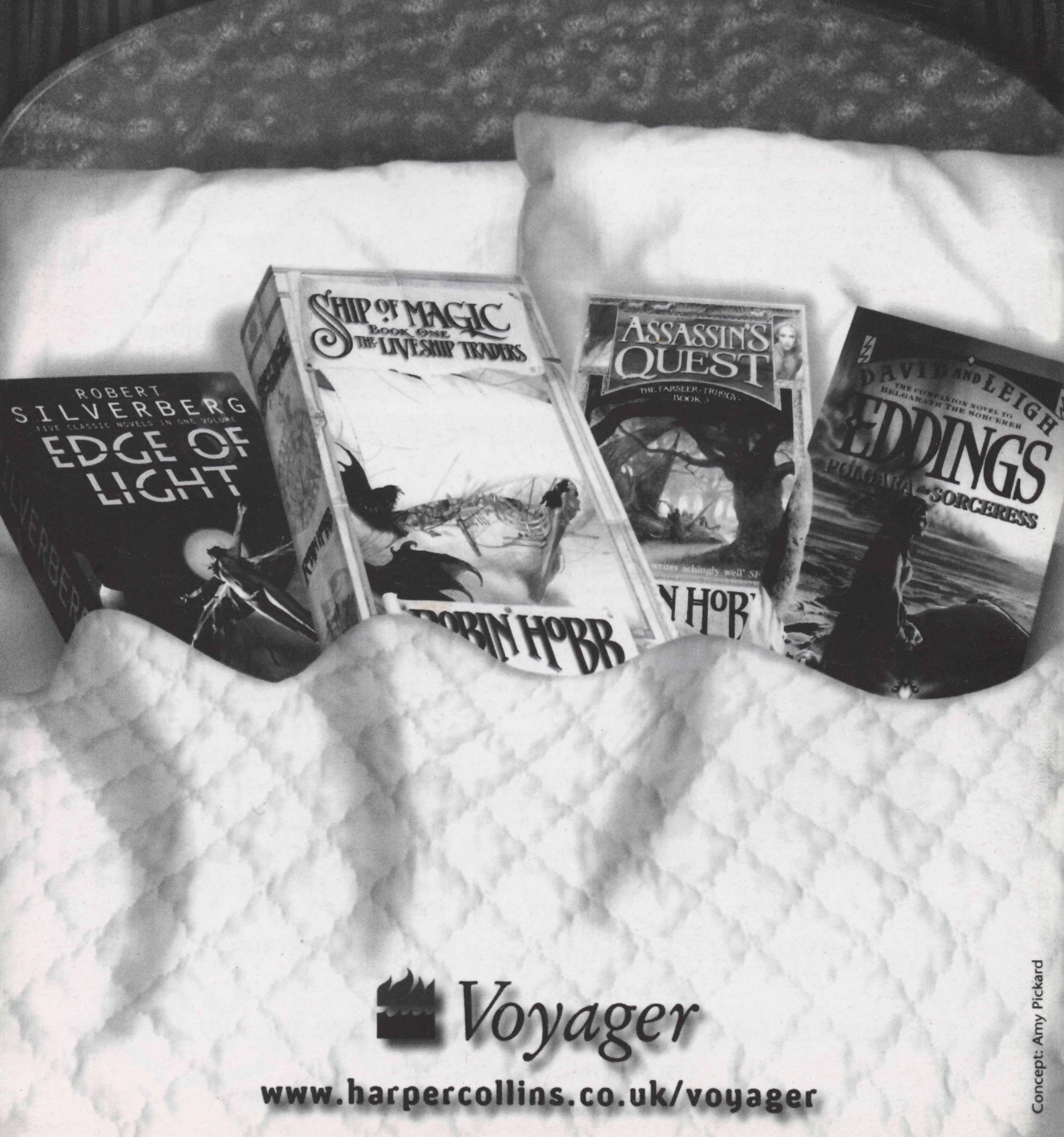
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